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FOXY FRED HAD SAVED HIS DETECTIVE COMRADE'S LIFE BY HIS TIMELY BLOW.

Foxy Fred's Odd Pard;

OR,

The Keener's Huge Hustle.

A Romance of the Strange Otis Case.

BY JO PIERCE,

AUTHOR OF "TOM THISTLE," "SPICY JIM,"
"DENNIS DUFF," "BOB O' THE BOWERY,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BLOW THAT WENT HOME.

THERE was a sensation in the household of Harding Otis. That morning no breakfast-bell had rung in the house, and when those who comprised the family were aroused, it was in a very unusual manner.

A servant had rapped at Mr. Otis's door.

"What is it?" the ex-merchant asked.

"Mr. Otis, I want to see you at once. Please to open the door."

It was the voice of Julia Day, the chambermaid, and Otis threw on his dressing-gown, unlocked the door and faced her. Her eyes were unusually large, and her expression was startled.

"Oh! sir!" she exclaimed, "something terrible has happened, down-stairs!"

"What is it?"

"When I went down no one was in the kitchen, and when I looked for the cook, I couldn't find her for a long time. She was in her room, tied hand and foot, and gagged. Some men did it, in the night."

"Ha! robbers, eh?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Robbers, certainly. I'll look to it."

Harding Otis seemed angry, but not alarmed. Before he retired from mercantile life he had made enough money so that he would never know the difference if burglars carried off all of the portable articles in the house, and he could afford to disregard the financial loss, if there was any. It was, however, exasperating to think that any one would have the audacity to make free with his premises.

He dressed with dispatch, and went down to see the cook, Mrs. Ruby White. As if in defiance of her name she was very black; a colored woman who was of ample proportions and, usually, of great good-humor. Just now she was groaning dismally.

"Et's been a hard night fer me, sah!" she declared. "They tied me up wuss'n a Christmas turkey, an' afore mornin' my j'int's ached that bad I thought they was rent a-thunder."

"Who were the men?"

"Deed, sah, I dunno how they looked. They was masked an' gloved, an' may have been white, or black, or Chinees, fer all I knows."

"Did they speak of plunder?"

"Didn't hear 'em, sah."

"It don't matter; we'll see what they secured. Come, Julia!"

The chambermaid followed him, and he went first to the safe where the family silver was kept. The safe was closed, and not a scratch was to be found upon it. Mr. Otis opened it, still unconvinced, but not a thing was missing.

Not a little puzzled, he next went to his wife's room. She always had been careless, and in the habit of leaving her diamonds lying around as freely as hair-pins, but, when she was aroused, it was found that all her jewels, her watch and her money were intact. When they had gone to the room of their invalid daughter, Madeline, and looked through the parlor, the tempting things of the house had all been accounted for. If burglars had been there they had ignored all that was really of value—and it could not be found that anything was gone, or disturbed.

"Strange!" Mr. Otis commented, in perplexity.

"Julia," added Mrs. Otis, "go to the rooms of Mrs. Stannard and Miss Walbridge."

"I will accompany you," added the master of the house, quickly.

So they went to the upper floors together.

Mrs. Stannard was "companion" to Madeline Otis, while Clarice Walbridge was a young lady who was endeavoring to instruct the twin sons of the household in the mysteries of early education. "Governess" was the name by which she was known, but the boys were so stubborn that it was hard to teach or govern them.

A knock at Mrs. Stannard's door brought her to view promptly. She had just finished dressing. It did not take her long to say that she had seen no burglars, but her face was anxious until she had made sure that her small possessions were safe.

Only one thing remained, and they went to the top floor of the house. The chambermaid knocked at Clarice Walbridge's door. There was no reply. She knocked a second time with the same result.

"She is asleep," Julia remarked.

"Then she sleeps soundly. Try the door."

Julia obeyed, and, very much to her surprise, it opened readily. She saw a vacant room. A woman's apparel lay as it had been disposed of for the night, but Miss Walbridge was not there.

"Why, this is odd!" exclaimed the maid.

She noted the fact that the bed had been occupied, and that the governess's modest little watch was ticking merrily on the mantel. Then she turned to her employer. Mr. Otis had been a strong, ruddy-faced man, and she had not heard it said that he was ill, but ill he certainly looked, now. His face was pale, and singularly haggard, and his eyes had a strange, glassy—almost a frightened appearance.

This occupied her attention but momentarily, then:

"Where can Miss Walbridge be?" she added.

Otis walked to the bed. Giving the covers a shake he developed a fact he believed he had noted before; the blanket is missing. Julia noticed this and commented upon it.

"Search the house for her!" the master ordered.

The maid hurried away. Left alone, Harding Otis looked around as if he expected the burglars to burst upon him in a body, with hostile intentions.

"Merciful heaven! it has come!" he whispered, consternation and terror in his voice.

If any one had overheard that exclamation the question would have been natural: What was there in the disappearance of a salaried girl, and a late arrival, at that, to cause the rich man to fall into a panic?

The bare walls seemed to interest him, as if the story of the night might be written there, but when he had looked to all points of the compass, he began to pace the room with quick and nervous steps. Once he wrung his hands, betraying emotion still more surprising.

Julia finally returned.

"Miss Walbridge is nowhere in the house, sir," she announced.

Otis did not look surprised. Neither did he answer.

"What can it mean?" the maid added. "Not a thing was stolen, anywhere."

"Robbery was not the motive."

"What could it have been, then?"

"I don't know."

"Mrs. Otis wants to know what we shall do,"

"About what?"

"Sending for the police."

"Oh!" ejaculated Harding Otis, with a start; and then he more quietly added: "Oh! of course. Well, have some one go around to the police station; I don't care who. I trust breakfast will not be delayed. I will be in my study."

And he walked rapidly out of the room.

"Dear me!" quoth Julia, "he takes it very coolly."

But Mr. Otis went to his study, locked himself in, staggered to the lounge and fell thereon in a faint. He, the strong man, lay there pale and limp, as helpless as a feeble woman. Strange fact!

Why had he fainted?

CHAPTER II.

WHO DID IT?

EITHER those left to do the work were not prompt about sending for the police, or the latter were not prompt in responding; it was some time later when an officer arrived. On being conducted to Mr. Otis's room, the latter met him in a perfectly calm way. He was somewhat pale, but wholly at his ease.

He told the story quietly.

"The missing girl must have been in league with the intruders," remarked the officer.

Otis was silent, whereupon the former speaker added:

"No; that cannot have been it. Nothing was taken but the girl, and she went without her clothes. The missing blanket indicates that she was hurriedly wrapped up in it, and, really abducted."

"Do you think so?" asked Otis, with polite interest.

"What else could have been case?"

"No doubt you're right."

"What is the girl's history?"

"It is unknown."

"Where are her relatives?"

"Equally unknown. She came from Toledo, with a recommendation from a friend of mine who had employed her, but who was about to leave for California. He remarked in the letter, I think, that she was not of Toledo, herself, but that her faithful service entitled her to a recommendation. Further than that I know nothing of her history. Where my friend is I cannot say. He went to California to look for a location, and may be anywhere between Oregon and Mexico. I never heard that the girl had relatives or acquaintances in this city."

Mr. Otis seemed to anticipate that a good many questions would be asked, and had answered them in advance by this comprehensive statement.

It left the officer downcast.

"We don't seem to have much of a clew," he remarked, gravely.

"Not especially."

"The intruders did not even care for plunder, for they neglected to take what was at their fingers' end, so to speak. Hence, it is clear that Miss Walbridge, and she alone, was what brought them here. Now, why could they want her? There is a history back of all this. These men knew her of old, and wished to get possession of her, in order wreak vengeance upon her, or keep her silent. Which?"

"That is the question," answered Otis, listlessly.

"Since we are so poorly informed, we can only hustle and try to locate her on general principles. Have you any suggestions?"

"Suggestions?"

"Since the search will not fall to my lot alone, I will remark that a reward offered by somebody would stimulate the force."

"Oh! well, say that I'll give two hundred dollars for her safe recovery."

Otis seemed to grow more indifferent as the conversation progressed, and, finding there was nothing to be learned there, the officer rose, said that he would question the servants, though he did not expect to learn anything thereby; and then return and put the machinery of law in operation.

He left the room, and then Harding Otis rested his head upon his hand.

"This is horrible!" he murmured. "Two hundred dollars? Why, I would give tens of thousands, if necessary. But what is money in this case?"

Outside his room matters were fast assuming the former tranquil state of the house. It was shocking, of course, to have any one thus spirited away, but Miss Walbridge was only a hired person, and nearly a stranger to all there. Mrs. Otis and Miss Otis grew calm; the Masters Otis, freed from the necessity of study, waxed bilious, and even the servants began to joke merrily over the affair.

After noon, however, when Mrs. Otis was congratulating herself that matters were no worse, her daughter's "companion," Mrs. Stannard, came to her with a serious face.

"Mrs. Otis," she began, abruptly, "this trouble has made me ill. Can I have leave of absence?"

"Ill? Why should you be ill?"

"It is the shock, madam."

"What was Miss Walbridge to you?"

"A sister woman; no more."

"And her abduction has made you ill?"

"Yes, madam."

"Then you are weaker than I thought. Go away? Nonsense, Stannard! you should not indulge such fancies. Suppose we all have had a scare, why, that is the best of reasons why we should feel safe. Lightning never strikes twice in the same place; we shall not have another invasion of our house."

"I think you under-estimate my courage, madam, and slightly misunderstand my meaning. All I desire is to go away to recuperate. After that, I certainly hope to return."

Mrs. Otis was not an indulgent woman, but Mrs. Stannard had been so eminently satisfactory as companion to the lady's invalid daughter, that she did not deem it prudent to be too dictatorial. Reluctantly, therefore, she finally consented to let her take a few days' vacation.

"Singin' skeeters!"

The exclamation was uttered by a boy of about fifteen years. He sat in a plain room of a house on Morton street, and was busy over several pieces of complicated machinery which were on the table.

"So you are here?" he added. "Wal, I'm

surprised, an' you came in like a ghost, but you're welcome. You're just in time, too, ter advise me erbout my flyin'-machine. I've got the frame o' the thing planned out, an' all that's necessary, now, is ter know how ter fly it. Have you any idee as ter the best way o' doin' that?"

He addressed a lady who had just come in, and if Mrs. Harding Otis had been there she would have recognized the employee who had been taken ill, though Mrs. Stannard did not look especially out of health at that moment. Ignoring the last question, she replied:

"It has come!"

"What?—the motive power?"

"The blow from Percy Berthrong."

Down went the boy's handful of metal.

"Say! you don't mean it?"

"But I do. I told you when he escaped from the hands of law that I should hear from him again—"

"Then you've seen him?"

"No. If I had I should not be here. Fred, you will find it hard to believe, but his tools, with or without him—probably the latter—invaded Harding Otis's house, last night, to steal me, but through some mischance they got the wrong woman. They carried her away and left no sign. It was a complete success, except that I was not their victim."

"Who see them?"

"Nobody, except when they were masked."

"Then how d'ye know it was Percy Berthrong, or his hired crooks?" Fred asked.

"Who else should it be?"

"Mebbe they really got the one they was after."

"No," Mrs. Stannard answered, in a confident manner. "At the first I was sure the abduction was intended for me, and I never have changed my mind. Percy Berthrong is seeking for revenge. He has started off with a mistake, but he will try again. It is a fight to the death between him and me!"

CHAPTER III.

TAKING BIG RISKS.

A GRAY-BEARDED man of rather fine appearance stood at the corner of Broadway and Great Jones street. He was in a meditative mood, but he suddenly aroused, crossed the latter street and accosted a boy who was passing.

"Say, my lad, what's your name?" he asked.

The boy regarded him doubtfully.

"Et might be Washington Adams Bonaparte," he replied, after a pause.

"But it is not. Ain't you Fred Walsingham?"

"Ter be frank, you've guessed it, in part. Frederick Walsingham Mather is my handle; commonly called Foxy Fred. Now, how'd you git onto it?"

"I saw you in court, during the trial of a man named Percy Berthrong. You were instrumental in bringing him to justice."

"I was, a few."

"He had a wife who figured in the case, also. Can you tell me where she is?"

"Dead!"

"Indeed! that's bad!"

The sudden gravity of the man's face attested to his sincerity in making the exclamation. Foxy Fred had been eying him with attention, which was a good deal tinged with suspicion, but this disappeared visibly as he noted his companion's change of expression.

"Et might be worse, mister, fer the dead sometimes rise. Ef you kin give good reasons fer it, I reckon she might rise from her shroud."

"Don't trifle with me."

"I ain't goin' ter."

"Then your words must mean that she is living."

"That's erbout the size of it."

"You doubtless had your motive in keeping back the fact, at first, so we will let that pass. I want to see this lady—Berthrong's wife."

"Why?"

"You seem determined to get information, rather than give it, but I will be frank. You are aware, of course, that he was sentenced to State Prison for a long term of years, but that he escaped before they could get him to the doors of Sing Sing. Since then no trace of him has been found. The police have been duly active, but he has not been located. Now, I am a detective—Jethro Warden, is my name—and I have been following the clew patiently. At last I think I have the clew, and I want Mrs. Berthrong to see a certain man and decide whether it is he."

"Do you want her ter git done up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Percy Berthrong would kill her at sight, I

think, ef he got a chance. His cruelty, crimes an' desertion put her ag'inst him, an' of course he is p'izon mad ag'inst her fer the share she had in bringin' him ter justice, before. She would be runnin' a big risk ter go near him, or the man s'posed ter be him."

"But it would mean her final safety, as he would be unmasked, recaptured and sent to prison."

"Now, see here, general: ef you really mean w'ot you say there ain't no need of callin' her in. I kin identify Percy Berthrong as wal as anybody else. See?"

Warden looked thoughtfully at the speaker, and did not answer for some time. Finally he returned:

"Perhaps it is just as well so; perhaps it is better. I had not thought of you in connection with the identification, for my mind naturally turned to the one who knew him best, but your claim gives me a new idea. Are you a boy of nerve?"

"Try me!"

"By entering a certain place we can see the object of my suspicions at once, perhaps, and I should be glad to have it so. Will you go?"

"Where is it?"

"A man named Berlong keeps a printing office not far away, but his place is more than that. He has a good deal of space, including a small hall and several smaller rooms. It is a resort for men who have no love for the law. Crooks go there and are welcome, for Berlong is no angel. He prints 'green-goods,' and circulars which would not be approved of by the police. I have only lately learned of the place and its character, and by a lucky stroke I have been introduced to Berlong as one of the fly fraternity. I have his promise to print me some documents, and can make this an excuse for going there."

"But where does Percy Berthrong come in?"

"I think he's the foreman, there."

"Ah!"

"He is flying very light, if it is Berthrong, but that is natural. Now, I would like you to see him."

"Has it occurred ter you that he will see me, too?" asked Foxy Fred, dryly.

"He is not likely to take much notice of you, and even if he does, what then? I shall arrest him on the spot, and he will have no chance to do you harm."

Fred meditated. It was not pleasant to think of going into a place avowedly the resort of law-breakers, where many men might chance to be present, with one among them who had reason to hate him bitterly, and was desperate enough to do any evil deed, but, from the time when Berthrong escaped, Fred had been anxious to see him recaptured.

There could be no safety for the crook's wife while he was at liberty.

The boy suddenly arrived at a decision.

"Heave ahead!" he directed.

"Good! Come with me; but let me observe as we go that you must be careful. Don't attract attention to yourself by staring fixedly at the foreman. Take your survey secretly and casually, as it were; and be sure to act as if wholly at your ease."

"All right; I'll be ez cuanin' ez a fox, fer my name comes from that beast. Foxy Fred, the Keener, is my full handle. I ought ter do somethin' on that, but mebbe I can't. The Fifth avenoo dudes travel on their shape, but they look like umbrella-sticks."

Warden was pleased to find his companion so cool and nonchalant, and much of his fear had abated by the time the place of trial was reached. He expected Berlong, the printer, to receive him as a full-fledged crook, and he hoped he could work "the Keener" through satisfactorily, if the latter kept his nerve.

On the other hand they were going among desperate men, and any little mistake might cost them dear.

The printing-office was on the second floor of a plain brick building, and when they had ascended the stairs and entered the rooms thus used, there was nothing to distinguish it from an ordinary printing-office.

The main room was larger than seemed necessary, for the equipments did not fill it, and, for that matter, only one press was busy and but three compositors at work.

Warden gave them a sweeping glance, and then turned to the right and entered the "office."

Evidently they went on style but little at Berlong's. The office was long and rude, and boxes and barrels, dirt and confusion, and other things, attested to the fact that order was not a feature of the business.

A stout, florid-faced man sat at the desk.

"Good-morning, Mr. Berlong," spoke the detective, politely.

"Ah! is it you, Mr. Nash? Glad to see you. Sit down! Anything I can do for you?"

"Are you very busy?"

"No."

"Well, I've got a job of printing, and I don't know just how to make up the blanks thereof. I wanted your advice."

"All right. Heave ahead!"

"Well, then, I've got a scheme for making an honest dollar out of ministers. I want circulars printed which will inform them I am compiling what I term 'The Year Book of Preachers.' It will give, my circular will say, the year of each preacher's birth; year of his graduation from college, if at all; year of his ordination; each pulpit he has filled, and a lot of other statistics. To get this I want a big, neat-looking blank, a copy of which I shall send to every minister in the United States."

"With an invitation to pony up?" suggested Berlong, smiling.

"Yes; it costs ten dollars a head to go in."

"And the book will be issued—when?"

"About the year 2500!"

"I thought so. Well, I'll help you on the blank, and I hope your honest endeavor will be rewarded. I see you have a draft of what you want. Let me look it over, and I will soon decide."

They began to confer.

All this while Foxy Fred had been sitting in silence, and no attention being paid him. He had kept his eyes open, hoping the foreman would cross the space of which he had view through the open door, but no one appeared. The compositors in the next room dawdled over their work, and it was clear that they were not genuine, honest type-setters. They had faces like sneak-thieves, and an air which bespoke their lawless nature.

Warden and Berlong did not agree upon the circular, and their discussion was prolonged. Warden insisted upon a system which the other man claimed was almost impossible, and the latter finally said:

"Let me call my foreman in. He is a practical printer, and will tell you just what is best."

"All right; call him," the detective agreed.

Berlong whistled through a tube.

Warden exchanged glances with Foxy Fred. The crisis was at hand, and the man believed to be the escaped convict would soon be at hand, too. It was a striking and momentous period. The "Keener" sat well back and hoped to get the first view, but Percy Berthrong surely would recognize him as soon as he saw him.

Then—what then?

The Keener and Warden were alone. Five men would be opposed to them; all law-breakers and criminals; men, perhaps, who would not hesitate to do murder, if necessary.

A step sounded at the door. A coatless man, unshaven and ink-smeared, walked in.

Foxy Fred recognized Percy, the convict.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RULE OF THE REVOLVERS.

It was evening. Harding Otis was walking slowly along the street, his head bent in thought. During the day, when in the company of any member of his household, he had preserved his air of being indifferent to the disappearance of Clarice Walbridge, but, nevertheless, the matter had set heavily upon his mind.

He was now returning from an errand, which, if known to others, would have surprised those who thought him so indifferent.

The street was lonely and nearly deserted, it seemed, and the locality one not noted for devotion to the precepts of law, but he could not have told, if asked suddenly, whether he was on that street or Fifth avenue.

A footstep sounded behind him. He raised his head suddenly.

In his present mood almost anything might have occurred in front of him without attracting any real attention, but a footfall in the rear, never a thing pleasant to the ear, meant a good deal to him. There were reasons why he had cause to fear anything secret.

He tried to turn, but, as he did so, a blanket of some sort was thrown over his head. Then an arm encircled his neck, and he was pulled off from his feet.

He tried to call for help, to escape. He struggled fiercely, but the power against him was too strong. He was borne into a doorway, and held by more than one pair of hands.

Every moment he expected a stroke which would end his career; perhaps the thrust of a

knife. It did not come, but he bade fair to suffocate. No air could enter the folds of the blanket, and the supply first imprisoned there was about exhausted.

While he was thinking of this he was again lifted and borne away, but only for a few steps. He was thrust into some place which he supposed was a door, but a new sensation quickly proclaimed the truth.

He was in a carriage, and being borne away.

Dimly he heard a voice beside him, and then the blanket was loosened, but only to allow of the introduction of a revolver which was thrust against his temple.

"Be silent, or you are a dead man!" came in a stern and menacing voice.

Otis said nothing, and the unknown went on:

"We don't want to do you harm, but are prepared to shoot you if you force us to it. We won't let a life like yours stand in our way. If you call for help it would go hard with us, and we won't have it. You give an alarm at your peril. It is silence or death!"

The blanket was still further loosened, evidently to give him a chance to breathe, but not a word passed his lips. He was too wise to shout for help with the weapon against his temple, and, strangely enough, he did not improve the chance to speak in an ordinary tone.

Naturally, almost any one would have been quick to ask the meaning of such violent work, but Harding Otis allowed himself to be carried away without a question or a remonstrance.

At last the carriage turned from the street into an alley, and thence to a stable at the rear. The captors alighted and took the prisoner out with them. All went to the office.

There, Otis was left standing alone, but on each side of him was a masked man, and four revolvers bore upon him. He regarded them during the pause which followed in a manner apathetic to the observer, but his face was pale and drops of perspiration stood on his forehead.

Presently one of the party spoke:

"You know us?"

"I suppose I do," Otis answered.

"It is years since you saw us last—"

"Yes, and you promised, then, never to molest me again!" suddenly, sharply interrupted the prisoner.

"It is your own fault that we meet again."

Otis was silent.

"We need explain nothing. You know how you came between us and our purposes, of late, inviting death; and if you suffer thereby you have only yourself to thank."

Evidently a reply was expected, but the captive looked somberly at the wall and seemed almost to forget them. His gaze came back when the leader impatiently continued:

"Where is the girl?"

"Where, indeed?" Otis echoed, with a shiver.

"You have spirited her away, but, we are not to be baffled. The world is not wide enough to hide any one we seek. Where is she?"

"Why do you descend to force?" cried Otis, with a return of emotion. "You came to my house and stole her away. I know not if she is living; I know not whether you have one grain of pity for the innocent. I suspect you have none."

"You are right. Pity is a quality which makes strong men weak fools; we want none of it. But do you think you can turn the tables upon us? You know we have not been in your house. Whatever you do, don't attempt any such shallow trick."

"Men," Otis returned, "I am your prisoner, and you can do with me as you please. I realize that, and realize the folly of an appeal for mercy. I make none; I am prepared to take whatever fate you allot me. Go on with your work without circumlocution; but for that girl I ask your pity. She never did you harm; why should you injure her?"

"We can't, until we find her."

"You have her now."

"I say we have not."

Otis evidently did not give the denial the least credence, but the masked spokesman more slowly added:

"Do you expect us to believe you had no hand in her disappearance?"

"You know I had none."

"Then where is she?"

The prisoner made an impatient gesture.

"This is childish. I had only just brought her to my home. Even if you were not concerned in her abduction it must be evident to you that I would not bring her there, keep her a few days, and then spirit her away. If I were going to do

the latter, why should I take her to my house at all?"

For the first time the spokesman looked at his companions and seemed to be in doubt. He hesitated, and then made a motion to one of the quartette, after which the two left the room. Otis's position was not improved. He still had two revolvers bearing upon him.

Now, however, he began to rally from what had seemed apathy, but which, really, had been the stupefaction of despair. He regarded his companions closely, as if he would read their faces through the masks.

"Men," he said, presently, "have I ever seen you before this night?"

"No," one of the pair answered.

"Then you have nothing against me."

"Well?"

"Men, I am rich. I can make other men well-to-do and never feel the loss of money. This I will gladly do to you if you will deserve it. What is life with your comrades to the pleasures you could have elsewhere. Money is grand; it is potent; it is the lever that moves the world. Think what you could do in Europe, for instance, with money. This you can have if you will allow me to go out of this place. Allow me to make a dash for liberty, and promise not to shoot."

It was a rapid, earnest plea, but the only reward was the cold response:

"We shall shoot you dead if you try it!"

"But the money—"

"We disdain it. Be silent! Would you make us traitors? No: we would rather shoot you!"

It was an implacable response, and Otis's brief hope fled. His heart seemed to lie in his breast with the weight of tons. Hopeless, indeed, was his cause.

The other men returned, and the former spokesman again broke the silence:

"We have decided that you are lying; that you do know where the girl is. Reveal her whereabouts, or you are a dead man!"

He touched the revolver to Otis's head.

CHAPTER V.

THE CONVICT AT BAY.

PERCY BERTHONG stood looking quietly at his superior. There was not the least trace of suspicion in his manner, and he did not once glance toward Foxy Fred. He could hardly have had a better disguise. In former days he had been an elegantly-dressed sport; now, he had a two weeks' stubble on his face as an incipient beard, and his ink-smeared hands were even cleaner than his ink-smeared, coarse old clothes. Foxy Fred easily recognized the fact that this ink, so lavishly spread on, was a part of his disguise.

The old-time sport was not there in appearance, and a casual acquaintance of past days would not have recognized him.

The Keener was not at fault, however.

"Mr. Brown," began Berlong, "sit down here and discuss this blank with us."

The foreman readily obeyed, and chance brought his chair so that his back was toward Foxy Fred. Beyond them all was a mirror, and in this the Keener could see the escaped convict's face.

It was calm, and he gave unsuspecting attention to the paper which Berlong and Detective Warden put before him. The latter was duly cautious, and talked about the blank and the circular as if it was the height of his ambition to carry on the swindle he claimed to have in mind, but, finally, he contrived to look at the Keener in a way which betrayed nothing.

Foxy Fred nodded, and then Warden knew he had found the escaped convict.

The detective did not betray himself, but went on with the argument until a decision was reached on the disputed points of the circular, about which he really cared nothing. In the mean while, he arranged his plan.

Since entering Berlong's establishment he had learned that he had, indeed, to deal with men not to be trifled with. Accustomed to the criminal classes he knew that any one of the five was ready for murderous action, if necessary. They had served full apprenticeship in the school of crime, and placed their interests above fear of the law.

Warden was well aware that prudence required him to get help before proceeding to action, but he wanted the glory of making the capture alone. He was resolved to do it, and his plan was to let Berthrong pass the office door, and then pounce upon him and, with the controlling power of a revolver, get him out of the establishment before the gang fully realized the situation.

Up to this time Foxy Fred, realizing that the

glass meant danger to their purpose, had kept behind Berthrong so that his own face would not be reflected, but, as the three men straightened up after their conference, the Keener lost the line.

He was squarely caught by the glass.

Worse than that, Berthrong saw the reflection of his face.

The ex-sport seemed to change to a statue.

In the very act of rising he stopped short, and his gaze was fixed on the shape in the glass.

Alarm, doubt and perplexity were pictured on his face.

Then came realization of a part of the truth, and everything else gave place to rage. He recognized one whom he knew to be his deadly enemy; who had done more than anybody else to bring his arrest about before, and the instincts of revenge and self-preservation rose within him at once.

His hand was thrust into some recess under the apron he wore; it came out claspng a revolver, and the weapon was hardly bared before he wheeled and presented it to Fred's breast.

"Spy!" he snarled; "you shall die!"

It really seemed that he intended to press the trigger, but his purpose was never fully demonstrated. If he was quick to act, Jethro Warden was not less active. The detective knocked up the revolver, and, in another instant, a shining six-shooter, held in his own hand, covered the convict.

"Don't do it!" he warned.

Perce Berthrong was not too dull to take a very perceptible hint, and he turned his gaze almost quietly upon the detective.

"What have you to do with it?" he demanded.

"That boy is my helper."

"In what?"

"Private work."

"That won't go down."

"It's a fact, and I won't see him injured. Hang it! we didn't come in here to be butchered."

"Perhaps you come as police spies."

The ex-sport's wits were flowing shrewdly, at last, and he did not fail to suspect the truth. He did not believe Foxy Fred would be the ally of a crook, and his knowledge of the Keener's character served to put Warden under definite suspicion. The latter, however, answered coolly:

"Your charge is an insult, but I will not let it worry me. A man who has been hunted from one end of the United States to the other hasn't much use for the police; he only asks to be left alone. A murrain on the police! Don't be absurd."

Berthrong had lowered his revolver half-unconsciously, and Warden followed his example, but they sat facing each other, both ready for work, and that meant a good deal when it was considered that they were good shots.

Into the pause came Berlong, the printer.

"What in perdition does this mean?" he demanded.

"Simply that your visitor is a spy."

"It is false!"

Both Perce and Warden spoke with emphasis, but that did not help matters. Berlong rung a bell, and the three compositors appeared at the door. Matters began to look very ugly for Jethro and the Keener.

"We will settle this, right away," declared Berlong. "Mr. Brown, what grounds have you for your charge?"

"This boy," Perce returned, motioning viciously toward Foxy Fred, "is an amateur detective, aid to detectives, police spy, or whatever you see fit to call him. He was the cause of all my recent troubles. But for him I should now be walking the streets of New York fearlessly."

The ex-sport glared at Fred. By his way of meeting the danger he had thrown off all pretense of secrecy; his disguise was such no longer, and he made no pretense of being anybody but Berthrong, the escaped convict.

He added, before any one else could speak:

"I know the boy well, and a demon he is. He can have but one motive in being here, and that is to ruin me—to capture me. He is a police spy, and it's likely that this fellow has a detective's badge under his coat."

The speaker motioned to Warden, who smiled easily.

"Wrong, all wrong," he averred. "I don't know what personal trouble you and my boy may have had, but he is a good helper of mine in just the lines I have indicated. I am sorry that any clash has occurred, for I hope much from the work you are to do for me; I hope for good, hard dollars."

Glancing meditatively at Foxy Fred, the detective seriously added:

"We want to smooth this over. For my part

I promise that, whatever the old trouble was, the kid shall keep his hands off. He is my helper, and must obey me."

"That looks fair," remarked Berlong.

"Looks are mighty deceptive!" cried Perce. "I am not to be deceived. These fiends are after me, but they won't get me. Eh, boys?"

The last question was to the anarchist-like compositors, who answered in a breath:

"You bet, he won't!"

"Long live the free life!" added Perce.

"Ay, ay!"

"Down with the police spies!"

"Down with them!"

These prompt responses pleased Perce, and he turned again to his enemies with a half-smile, confident and vindictive.

CHAPTER VI.

AN OLD GRUDGE TO BE SETTLED.

"You are in for it!" the convict declared. "You will never go away to betray me. These bold fellows are ready to back me up, for they have no love for the cause you represent."

"Down with the police!" chorused the trio by the door.

Foxy Fred's face was grave. He saw that no argument could convince Percy Berthrong, which only showed his common sense, for the past had shown him just how he and the Keener stood. The odds were too great to think of successful resistance with the so-called compositors counted in. Type-setters they undoubtedly were, but that trade had grown out of their lawless mode of life.

The Keener looked at Walden. What would he do in such a dilemma?

"It seems to me," spoke the detective, complainingly, "that you are giving us a cold deal. We came here in good faith, and now a ridiculous charge is trumped up against us. Do you uphold this course, Mr. Berlong?"

"Brown can manage this case."

"I decline to treat with Brown."

"You'll have to!" the convict asserted. "You are not going out of here to blow on me."

"What does that mean?"

"Simply that we have quarters here for just such men as you, and you will have to walk in and occupy them. You are prisoners!"

"Prisoners! Never! We will not submit!"

"What will you do?"

As if to guide the answer, Perce motioned to the trio, and each man drew a revolver.

"Do you want to argue?" the convict tersely asked.

Walden sat in silence. He was a cool, brave man, but these very qualities showed him that there was a limit to resolute action. He was armed himself, but the enemy counted five, and it was absurd to suppose he could dispose of all of them. What would they be doing in the meanwhile?

"Your methods are infamous," he finally answered, "but I am willing to do what I can to avoid trouble. I will submit to temporary restraint on one condition: that you send to a man who will prove me what I claim to be."

"Who is he?"

"A man named Fly Pete."

"Never heard of him, and we decline to treat. We can, however, learn more of you in our own way than may be pleasant for you, and this we will do. You can march into a room of restraint, and we will see you again when we feel like it."

Berthrong was insolent in his hour of triumph, and not at all inclined to abate an inch. Walden at first insisted upon being allowed to remain in the office, but this demand was not heeded, and when he had exhausted all means, he submitted to the imprisonment.

Surrounded by all of the gang, he and Foxy Fred were escorted to the rear of the building and locked up in a room there. Berthrong had asked for the detective's revolver, but the latter had forcibly declared that he would shoot the first one who tried to take it, and he had his way in this.

The door closed upon the prisoners.

"Wal, this is a fine high-jinks!" the Keener observed.

"It is highly unjust," agreed Walden, with a cautious look backward which was a mute inquiry as to whether the ears of the enemy were busy trying to trap them.

"Fer folks ez highly recommended as them it passes belief," pursued Foxy Fred. "Wouldn't 'a' thought it, by Susanna! I've had a skirmish with one o' them in the past, but old scores is settled. I hold no grudge."

This diplomatic conversation was kept up for some time, but when convinced that they were

not shadowed by listeners, the prisoners moved nearer together.

"Say, ain't we in fer it?" the Keener asked.

"We are indeed."

"Dennis K. Mud is the name that fits us. The gang is dead onter us, an' Perce Berthrong won't let up a fraction. He's a corker, Perce is."

"We are surely prisoners, and I have a vague notion that Berthrong has a clew to my identity. If he should bring somebody here who would succeed in identifying us—"

The speaker stopped short.

"We wouldn't git out alive," Foxy Fred finished.

"Frankly, that's about it."

"Kind o' creepy, ain't it?"

The Keener did not seem to be overwhelmed by the situation, and Warden nodded his approval. It was pleasant to have such an ally.

The room was one which gave no promise of escape. The door was heavy and tightly fitted, and the plain board walls had no window in their surface, or other break. Indeed, the room might have been nearly air-tight had there not been an iron grate fixed in the ceiling, some ten feet above the floor. Up there, too, was the faint light of a gas-jet.

It did not take them long to satisfy themselves that escape was out of the question, and they settled down to take matters as easily as possible. Warden recognized with considerable uneasiness, however, that night was not far away.

It was the time when the lawless part of New York's citizens chiefly did their dark work.

A good deal of thinking was done in the room in the two hours which followed. Then the captives had cause to turn their minds on visible, and away from speculative things. They heard the bolts slid on the other side of the door, and Warden bade Fred keep close to him. The door opened, and four men appeared—Berthrong and the evil trio.

The detective at once discovered a *something* in their facial appearance which gave him an involuntary shiver. Somehow, even then, memory recalled accounts he had heard of the tools of tyrant kings who had gone to prisoners' cells to assassinate them.

As the present gang looked, so might the old-time assassins have looked.

Berthrong carried a lantern, and this he held up so he could look around more fully. Then he lowered it and doggedly said:

"You are wanted!"

With this laconic remark he pointed to Foxy Fred.

"Wanted, be I? Who wants me?"

"I."

"What fer?"

"You two are going to be separated."

"When then?" Warden interrupted.

"That is my business. Come!"

He motioned to the Keener, but the latter did not stir. He was as observing as Warden, and felt sure that the separation was to be no trivial matter to him. If Perce had announced that he was to be killed off-hand it would not have surprised him, after seeing what was expressed in the convict's face.

"Take him!" Berthrong impatiently went on, after a brief pause, speaking to one of his followers.

The latter started forward, but Warden again interrupted.

"Stop!" he ordered. "This boy is my friend, and I will not allow him to be separated from me. I have yielded much to you, but I'll yield no more. Where I stay the boy stays, too!"

He held his revolver ready for use, and his purpose was not to be mistaken.

"Fool!" Berthrong exclaimed; "will you go to ruin with him?"

"I will defend him."

"Then you shall both die!"

"Ha! so you confess you meant to kill him?" "Have it as you will," almost shouted the convict. "We are here to take him away, and we're going to do it. If you resist, you sign your death-warrant. Advance, men!"

CHAPTER VII.

WARM WORK.

THE detective drew back the hammer of the revolver and leveled the weapon.

"I give you fair warning," he firmly replied. "Keep away, or I will shoot the first man who tries to molest us!"

There was no mistaking his resolution, and Berthrong and his tools stood still. They had the odds with them, and were well supplied with weapons. In the long run the fight was sure to go in their favor, but no one was anxious to give up his life for the cause.

It was a striking lull, but presently, Berthrong addressed Foxy Fred:

"Will you drag your friend down to ruin with you, or are you manly enough to come out?"

"Admiral," the Keener replied, coolly, "my wisdom teeth ain't in nobody's head but my own. I am content to be a small toad in the puddle. Guess I won't go ter walk with you, ef it's all the same ter the gents present."

Berthrong put his lantern under his coat, hiding it wholly. Then he whistled sharply. It was a signal, and was answered promptly. The gas-light above went out in a twinkling, and the room was plunged in darkness.

This trick had not been suspected, and it could not but startle the prisoners, but Warden's wits worked quickly.

"Make a dash for liberty!" he whispered, in Fred's ear.

The Keener was only too glad to get a chance, and he plunged forward like a Texas steer. He was shrewd enough to realize that it never would do to run up against the enemy squarely. He took a circular course, keeping close to the wall. Once he touched somebody else and an arm was reached out, but he dodged under it and reached the door. He feared to find it fastened, but such was not the case.

It yielded; he tore it open.

He was face to face with Berlong.

For an instant the Keener was dazed. He realized that the man was there to cut off retreat, and he never had looked so big and strong as then, but the boy knew a trick which even avoirdupois could not render useless. Lowering his head he made a dive forward, striking Berlong full in the stomach, and the fellow went over like a ten-pin.

Unfortunately, Fred could not check his own impetus, and he fell upon his victim. Then, before he could rise, somebody fell upon him, and others were added to the pile until it was a confused mass of wriggling bodies and flying arms and legs.

The Keener was a slippery customer, and it did not take him long to get out of the heap. Warden had been there, too, but he was in luck and got clear at the same time.

"This way!" he exclaimed.

He pointed toward an open door at the rear. Fred cast a wistful glance at the front door, but, even then, read Warden's fear, that it was locked. He darted toward that at the rear, and both he and the detective crossed the threshold.

A strong breeze touched their faces, and they saw they were in a court of some kind. Buildings, large and small, but mostly shanties, were around them, and it was not plain which way they were to go for safety. The voices of the crooks sounded behind them, however, and there was no time for investigation or study.

"Run!" Warden ordered. "We must break through, somewhere!"

They hurried on, nearly falling over barrels and boxes that were in the way, but soon found their condition even worse. They were in a *cul-de-sac*; three buildings which connected made three sides of a square.

The tramp of the pursuers sounded close behind them.

"Here's for liberty!" cried the detective.

At one side a window showed a light beyond, and he caught up a barrel, swung it aloft, and then sent it crashing through the glass. It cleared everything away, even to the sash, and Warden then rested his hand on the sill and leaped through.

Foxy Fred followed like a gymnast.

Then both stopped short, surprised at a scene unexpectedly presented to their view. They were in a small, rough room, with several horses visible beyond and the odor of a stable in the air, while just in front of them were several men, all masked but one.

And one of the masks was holding a revolver to the head of him who wore no mask.

"Harding Otis!" muttered the Keener, mechanically.

"The police!" cried one of the disguised men. "Get out of this. Run!"

And as one person they dashed out of the room.

Foxy Fred was looking at Otis in wonder, but Warden remained attentive to practical things. He turned in time to face their own pursuers, as Berthrong and his tools hurried to the window; and they suddenly found a revolver thrust forward and bearing upon them. The scene had changed vastly since they were in their own quarters, and a revolver became more an object of dread.

They wheeled and dashed back whence they had come.

Warden stood in irresolution, eager to follow and capture the ex-sport, but deterred by prudence.

"Singin' 'skeeters!" exclaimed the Keener; "how did you git here, mister?"

The question was asked of Harding Otis, but the rich man regarded him inquiringly.

"I don't know you," he returned.

"Didn't s'pect you did, but I know you! When I git interested in a feller I generally contrive a way ter git my opterkel eyes on him an' see how he looks."

"Out of here, all!" the detective ordered.

"It seems that there are two gangs abroad, and though I don't know what the second is driving at, there are enough to clean us out. Besides, we have business elsewhere."

He hurried out of the office and stable, and along the alley toward the street, and his companions were not reluctant to follow. Foxy Fred was looking at Otis wonderingly, curious to know how the rich man had chanced to be in the stable with a revolver at his head, but Otis's face was set, and he made no step toward explanation.

They reached the street, and there was general relief.

"Guess we're still 'in it!'" the Keener declared.

"There is work to be done," added Warden, hurriedly. "We have located Berthrong at last, and he must not be allowed to escape. I will remain and watch the building, Fred, and do you hurry to the police station for help. See?"

"I'm 'on,' an' I'm off!"

The Keener answered the more readily because Otis had already taken the same direction. He was soon by the latter's side, and his inquisitive propensity brooked no delay.

"Say, mister, we found you in a p'izon fix, didn't we?"

"You did. Your coming relieved me. Allow me to thank you."

Otis's manner was as curt as his words, but Fred was not to be discouraged.

"W'ot was it all about?"

"Merely a personal affair."

"But why was them masked fellers goin' ter shoot ye?—fer I seen them have a revolver at yer head."

"The matter is all over with," answered Otis, "and I owe you thanks. You came just in time. I trust your own business will end as well, whatever it is. As to its nature you need not explain, for I am interested only in my own affairs. It is a good rule to follow."

The speaker's voice had grown very civil, even kind, but the hint was too plain to be lost upon the hearer. Foxy Fred realized that he had been very distinctly told not to pry into Mr. Harding Otis's affairs. He was not in any degree bashful, and it was doubtful if he would have heeded the injunction, but at the next street-corner Otis left him abruptly and walked away.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DECREE OF DOOM.

"WAL, I guess I ain't in it!" The Keener made the remark dryly as he watched Mr. Otis recede. If he had been at leisure the rich man might not have escaped so easily, but Fred was not one to shirk his duty. He let the man go and hastened on his own way.

"Great goin's on, ter-night, by gum!" he commented. "Can't imagine who them masked critters was, but they had H. Otis, Esquire, right by the wool. One tap on the trigger of that six-shooter would have put him ter sleep. Wonder ef his case was connected with ourn? But why should it be? His servant was stole, but that is no reason why anybody should practise shootin' with him fer a target."

By that time the precinct station-house was reached, and the Keener dashed in and called for police reinforcements. The order was obeyed sooner than he expected, and in a comparatively short time he had the men back where Warden still awaited them.

"No sign from the enemy," remarked the detective. "It really looks as if we have them housed."

He rapped on the door, and, when no reply came, forced it open. Resistance was expected, but none was met with, nor was any one found to resist. The closest survey failed to bring one of the gang to light, and Warden was compelled reluctantly to decide, that they had made good their escape.

"Deuced hard luck!" he commented.

The stable was visited. There were two sleepy-looking hostlers there, but they professed

ignorance and innocence. They explained the scene in the office, in which Otis had taken such an uncomfortable part, by saying that all those concerned had been strangers to them. They thought it only a drunken row, but were not in any degree certain.

Foxy Fred, at least, took their statements with a large grain of allowance, but the rebuff he had received from Otis had not left him eager to work in the latter's behalf.

Utterly failing to get any clew to Berthrong, Warden led the way to the street and dismissed his police aids. Fred lingered with him.

"My lad," then observed the detective, "you have done nobly and proved yourself possessed of great nerve. Although we have failed, I am very grateful for your aid."

"That's all right, general; but w'ot about Perce?"

"I shall search anew."

"Ef you find a young woman with the gang, look after her, will ye?"

"A young woman?"

"I may as well tell you all," Fred decided; whereupon he related the story of Clarice Walbridge's strange disappearance from Harding Otis's house, and the suspicions which he and "Mrs. Stannard" entertained.

"Et would be jest like Perce ter take revenge on his wife," the Keener said, in conclusion, "an' we argue that such was his first thought as soon as he escaped. He watched, found out she was workin' fer Harding Otis, an' sent in his men ter kidnap her. In some way, mebbe, they thought they knew where she slept, but they didn't. Anyhow, they got the wrong woman."

"And you think Berthrong has Miss Walbridge, now?"

"Yes."

"If she is not the woman he wanted, why doesn't he allow her to go away?"

"Mebbe he dassent, an' then, ag'in, mebbe she's pretty enough so he thinks he'll be less lonesome with her around."

"Logical, as usual. I am converted to your belief, and will make her an additional feature of my search. By the way, call on me when you can. I'd like to keep track of one who has shared my dangers, and it's possible we may be able to work further together."

"I'm with ye, general; I'll call."

The Keener spoke heartily, and they shook hands and separated.

"Seems like old times ter be buckin' ag'inst Perce," soliloquized Fred, as he walked homeward. "I've got ter keep it up, too, for Mary Stannard won't be safe while he's at liberty. Yes; an' I've got ter rescue Clarice Walbridge, too—fer Perce has got her, sure!"

But what would Foxy Fred have thought could he have looked over the shoulder of an acquaintance in the same house from which Clarice had disappeared and read the following letter as its recipient read it, the next morning:

"HARDING OTIS:—With the luck which sometimes attends the perjurer and the traitor you escaped us last night. Chance defeated us. Do not, however, flatter yourself that you have triumphed. You merely have a reprieve. The Power still lives, and its hand will soon be at your throat. We will be frank enough to say that the girl is in our hands; why we took the course with you, last night, that we did, matters not. The Power has reached her, but its work is not yet done. Tremble, you, for the next blow concerns you. Your doom has been pronounced. According to the custom of the Power, you are not to know when the blow is to fall. It may be at morning, noon or evening; or it may be at the dead of night. You may awaken to find the slayer at your bedside. The Doom is pronounced. For the Committee of Death, "AZRAEL."

Harding Otis dropped the paper.

"It was to be expected!" he murmured.

His face was pale, but there was a calmness, outwardly, in his manner which was not to be expected. No gleam of defiance appeared in his eyes, however; he acted more like a man who, doomed to die, had given up hope and resigned himself to his fate.

Anon, he rose and began to pace the floor. Deeply he meditated, and his features began to work strangely.

"I can die!" he cried, at last, "but she must not. She must be saved! But how? Is there power enough in New York City to do it? I will call upon the chief inspector, and all his force— But, no; I may as well adhere to the original plan. One shrewd man may be able to do more than a score. Pray Heaven the child may be saved from those fiends!"

Late as it was, Foxy Fred did not think of retiring until he had seen Mary Stannard.

"You are late," she remarked.

"I've been busy. Stopped ter play craps," Fred replied.

"You fail to convince me. You never let trivial things delay you. Have you seen any of the enemy?"

"A few."

"Was it Percy Berthrong?"

"He saw me!" the Keener dryly remarked. "Listen ter the chronikel!"

And then he told the whole story. He had a rapt listener. When Mary Stannard married Percy Berthrong she had been inexperienced in the world. He dazzled her with his good looks, good clothes and aristocratic ways. Gradually she learned that he was far from perfect, and, later, that he was a crook. He abused her, but she clung to him devotedly until his many crimes compelled her to leave him. To frustrate his plans in an infamous scheme she assumed the disguise of a boy and worked hand-in-hand with Fred to accomplish the desired end.

He was captured and sent to prison, and she assumed her maiden name of Stannard and tried to lead a quiet life, but his escape and the renewal of hostilities, was proof that quiet was not yet hers.

"The battle must be fought over again," she sighed.

"Fact, by ginger!"

"You have seen how he hates you. He hates me even worse, for it maddened him when I dared to turn against him. You are right in thinking he is after revenge. Yes; and, unless we beat him again, he will kill me!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DETECTIVE COMRADE'S RISK.

"YOU must hide!" Foxy Fred declared.

"I will do better than that," Mrs. Stannard firmly answered. "I will again disguise myself as a boy, and once more we will be detective comrades in bringing Percy Berthrong to justice."

"But say; he's seen you in boy's clothes already, an' he will know ye, first off," Fred cautioned.

Mrs. Stannard smiled calmly.

"We will see. Before, I practically had no disguise except the clothes of a boy. This time it will be different. When I heard that he had made his escape my first idea was to flee; my next, to disguise myself so as to look like an entirely different woman. I finally decided to go to Mr. Otis's house and sink into quiet life, which I did, but the idea of a disguise has not been out of my mind. To-morrow morning I will show you what I can do. Then we will take the trail."

"Et's resky."

"Don't I know that?"

"You do, sure."

"Whatever I risk, I will do my best to save poor Clarice Walbridge."

"Et's hard on her ter suffer fer somebody else, I allow."

"Yes, and we will rescue her!"

Mrs. Stannard spoke confidently, but, though she had on former occasions proved her courage, the Keener was not wholly satisfied to have her venture within reach of Berthrong. He had faith in her judgment, however and opposed her no further.

Shortly after he retired to rest, and slept well until morning. He was late in knocking at Mrs. Stannard's door, but, when he did, it was at once opened. Some one whom he took to be a stranger stood there.

"Mrs. Stannard in?" he asked.

"She has gone to Chicago."

"Gone—to—Chicago?"

The Keener repeated the words in amazement. What could have sent her to Chicago, and without seeing him?

"Why," he added, "what the dickens— Singin' 'skeeters!"

The "stranger" had smiled, and it was this which made Fred stop short and, later, utter the exclamation.

"Wal, I'll be darned!" he added.

For it was Mrs. Stannard who stood before him, but so changed that she had deceived even him. Not until he was in the room and had looked still further did he realize the extent of the change.

She had colored her straight, light-brown hair to a deep black, and curled it in ringlets short and erratic; she had darkened her skin until it was a peculiar shade of brown; and in place of her usual costume she wore a man's fancy suit.

"Why, you look like a stage feller!" Fred declared.

"How about a Cuban?"

"Singin' 'skeeters! you've hit it. I ketch your

idea. You look it ter the life, an' nobody would ever suspect who you be."

"I am going to test it thoroughly."

"How?"

"By bearding the lion in his den."

"You don't mean Percy?"

"Have you noticed the similarity in the name, Berthrong, and that of the keeper of the printing-office, Berlong. Once, when I was with Percy, something occurred which made me think he had a brother, but the man did not bear the same name. It was Berlong, and in looking into the matter, I found out just what circles the other man moved in. They were crooks."

"An' you now think you're right?"

"I think this Berlong may be Percy's brother, and I am going to improve my knowledge of his associates to go into his circle. I think tidings may be had of Percy, and of Clarice Walbridge."

"You'll run a p'izon big risk."

"Think of my motives—to save Clarice; to save my own life, perhaps, for I am sure Percy Berthrong will strike at me again."

Foxy Fred was not yet satisfied, and a long conference ensued, but Mrs. Stannard was firm, and he had to yield. Dangerous as it was, it was arranged that she should go at once to the crooks' quarters, and that Fred should hover near the place, after going there by another route, ready to watch for signals and help her if needed.

They had breakfast, and Mrs. Stannard then left the house. She had added a tall hat, a cane and kid gloves to her attire, and looked like a genuine Cuban sport. This character she tried to strengthen by assuming an appropriate air, and, Fred had declared, with great success.

She did not allow her jaunty manner to lessen as she approached the place of danger.

The place had its peculiarities. It was under the control of a "society" of crooks. Looking at it in front the chance observer would see two buildings. One was a wide concern with a matter-of-fact, honest business carried on upon the ground floor, and offices above; the other was a dwelling-house.

No one not in the secret would suspect that there was any connection between the two, but, if the woman detective was not misinformed, such a connection did exist.

She boldly rung the bell, and, when a servant appeared, airily inquired:

"Lady of the house in?"

"She be, that."

"Give her this, please."

A card was handed over. It bore a somewhat unique and mysterious inscription:

"LOCK HEART,

New York.

"B. B. B. Soc., W. Div."

The servant gazed at it for a moment, and then phlegmatically bade the applicant enter the parlor. This done, she disappeared with the card. When she returned Mrs. Stannard was not surprised that a man, instead of a woman, accompanied her.

He was a commonplace-looking man. There was no trace of suspicion in his manner as he intently gazed at her.

"This is your card," he remarked.

"It is."

"The inscription is strange."

"Not to those in the secret."

"For what?"

"Booty, Blood and Beauty, the three Bs."

The man smiled.

"The Western Division of the Society welcomes you. Come up-stairs, and you shall talk with one higher in authority than I."

Mrs. Stannard breathed a sigh of relief that her first effort had succeeded so well. In the old days she had gathered a little of the forms and secrets of the particular fraternity of crooks to which Berthrong had belonged. The card was a part of their secrets. Any one holding a copy was thus introduced, and if he could give the password, as she had just given it, he would be received as a friend if he further proved satisfactory.

Thus far all had gone well, but it was only a beginning.

The woman detective followed her guide up the stairs. On the next floor he threw open a door, bidding her enter, and she obeyed, her glossy hat and stylish cane held in a jaunty manner.

There, a man rose to receive her, and she stood face to face with Berlong, the crook printer. She saw at once that he would be more critical than the other man, for he fixed a keen and searching gaze upon her.

CHAPTER X.

A DESPERATE CHANCE.

THE disguised woman bowed quietly.

"Good-morning," spoke Berlong, somewhat stiffly. "Will you be seated? I shall take pleasure in learning who you are."

"That is easily told. By name I am Juan Costa; by nativity, a Cuban. I bring a card to you."

"So I have seen. Is it yours by right?"

"By gift, only. My health," and the alleged Cuban smiled, "requiring me to leave the land of my birth, I wished to meet those here whose ideas would match mine. A friend gave me the card. I came with it, his blessing, and a miserly sum of money."

"Who was he?"

"His name was John Ambrose, once of New York."

Here the "Cuban" took a risk. He did not know whether the "Society" was systematic enough to have a list of members, or not. If one was kept, the fact might expose his false claims. Berlong, however, gave no sign of fresh suspicion.

"What do you wish to do in New York?" he asked.

"Live!"

"How?"

"By my wits!"

"How did you live in Cuba?"

"In the same way."

Juan Costa crossed his legs, assuming an airy manner, and lightly added:

"I wish to be frank. I'll confess that I was born tired. Work and I never seemed drawn toward each other. The only attraction money and I had for each other was when the precious stuff stuck to my fingers. I early decided that I would let other men work and go down to their graves honored and happy, while I would live on them, vulture-like, and probably wind up my career with the hangman's noose around my neck. I carried out my views in Cuba until I was forced to skip. I am now in New York. My money will last a few days. After that I must get more. Perhaps it will be by highway robbery, but I hope to find friends who will show me a neater way."

As this explanation advanced, Berlong's brow gradually cleared.

The visitor assumed the air of a reckless adventurer so well that the listener could not fail to be favorably impressed.

"You have come with the card of the society," he remarked, "and that is supposed to be a satisfactory recommendation. Tell me more of yourself."

Juan Costa obeyed. The lesson had been thoroughly learned, and the alleged history of his life was rolled off glibly. His manner was never that of a braggart; it was simply good-natured, airy and reckless. Before he was through, Berlong had laughed more than once, and the battle was won.

The latter would not be foolish enough to betray dangerous secrets, but he had no doubt that Costa was to be trusted, and would prove a faithful helper in any crooked work they might lay out.

He therefore welcomed the new-comer cordially, and showed him the quarters of the society. The house they were in was a boarding-place for crooks who made up the organization, and, in addition, they had a large room at the rear of the adjoining building. A secret door led to the latter place, and furnished a way of retreat in time of necessity.

When Costa had seen everything which the host cared to show, he invited the entertainer out to walk. Berlong shook his head.

"I'm in retirement now."

"For your health?" laughed the Cuban.

"Yes. A very unlucky thing occurred last night. I had a place where I did a matter-of-fact business, but made good pay by taking in work which could not be trusted to Tom, Dick and Harry. A bad affair has ended my business, and force me to keep under cover."

"Detectives, I suppose?"

"A woman!"

Berlong scowled and forcibly added:

"A crook has no business to look at women, or think of them. If he does, he is sure to get into trouble. It's always so."

"I know, but we can't be of ice."

"Some men can't."

This surly rejoinder led the Cuban to believe the speaker was thinking of Percy Berthrong, but no more was added.

"You've got a jolly place here," remarked Juan, anon. "If kidnapping can be carried on in New York, this would be a prime place to hold folks prisoners."

"Kidnapping be hanged! I don't like it."

"Suppose I wanted some one shut up here, would you allow it?"

"Decidedly not! I have fought the idea at all times. The boys have their games going on, but they can bring nobody here, man or woman."

Berlong spoke freely, and the Cuban was satisfied on one point: Clarice Walbridge was not there. He longed to continue the questioning, but saw no possible way of doing it without inevitably arousing the suspicions of his companion. The only way was to gain his confidence, and this he set out to do.

Talking freely, he made himself as agreeable as possible, and seemed to score a success, but Berlong did not touch on the subject of interest.

Juan finally decided to leave, and was about to mention the matter when footsteps in the hall were followed by the opening of the door. The Cuban looked up and saw a man enter.

It was Percy Berthrong!

From the first the crook's wife had foreseen the possibility of meeting her former husband, and had schooled herself to do it calmly, but even her courage was not sufficient then. She felt the blood recede from her browned face, and an icy chill seemed to assail her heart.

What if she was recognized?

Nothing but her death would satisfy the man who hated her so bitterly.

The ex-sport was looking out of trim and out of temper; indeed, his face was scowling and ugly, and he looked at the other persons like an ill-tempered bulldog.

"Mr. Brown, this is Senor Costa," remarked Berlong.

"How are you?"

With this surly recognition of the introduction Percy passed the others, went to a writing-desk in the corner, seized upon pen and paper as if they had done him some personal injury, and began to write.

Berlong took this manifestation as a matter of course, and began to speak to Juan again, but the latter found it a vast task to recover due nerve and coolness. Berthrong's wife had practiced speaking in a disguised voice, but dared she trust herself in his presence?

Would he not recognize her tones at once?

She clearly saw she had overestimated her strength, but this very fact caused all her energy to remonstrate against her weakness. Making a supreme effort she managed to command her voice.

She answered, and watched the effect upon Percy.

He wrote without raising his head.

Berlong spoke on, and the "Cuban" took due part, anxious to get away, yet dreading the effects of too much haste, and anxious to see if his companions would not let drop some clew to Clarice Walbridge.

Berlong finally chanced to mention the word "woman" casually, and at its sound Percy finished his writing with a vicious sweep of the pen and turned toward his companions sharply.

It was clear that he had something to say.

CHAPTER XI.

IN STRANGE COMPANY.

"WOMEN!" cried the convict, bitterly. "Why do you forever prate of them? Why don't you expunge the word from your vocabulary?"

"It strikes me you have more cause to do that than I," dryly returned Berlong.

"I know them better," retorted Berthrong. "Who knows them better? I've married one, and tried to marry another. The latter would have made me rich had it not been for the former, but she had to step in and ruin all. I expect to hang for her!"

Again the chill settled over the Cuban's heart, but Berlong impatiently returned:

"Nonsense!"

"Nonsense, is it?" the convict replied. "We shall see. Everybody knows that when a man starts out in crooked work he practically makes a bid to be handled by the hangman, as a wind-up to his career. While the honest men go their even way, the crook marches on step by step in crime; he never knows when he lies down at night how soon a cell door may close upon him; he never knows when a detective's hand will fall on his shoulder. If he keeps his liberty he goes the whole race of crime. First step, fast young man; second, petty thief; third, general swindler; fourth, robbery with violence; fifth, murder and the gallows. That all crooks don't get there is because they die a trifle too soon!"

"What has that to do with women?"

"With me, much!"

Berlong was silent, and Percy added:

"All the set-backs I have had have come

through women, and I expect to hang for a woman!"

There was no mistaking what he meant. His face told the story, and Mrs. Stannard knew that, as far as he could control her future, she was doomed. His anger because she frustrated his plans had gone on until it had become a mania, and it was she who was menaced.

Surely, there was good reason why she should sit silent and dismayed.

Berthrong had freed his mind, and he, too, remained silent. He gnawed at his mustache and stared almost wildly at vacancy.

"You ought to put this out of your mind," advised Berlong. "No good can come of it."

"I am studying how to work it," the convict explained. "I think the way to locate her is to shadow the boy, Foxy Fred. Patience will enable us to dog him straight to where she lives; then I will find some way to get at her. I never shall prosper until—"

He made a significant motion, and then rose, went to the mantel and lighted a cigar.

"Young man," he added, addressing the Cuban, "take warning from me. You are young, and have yet to grow the first down on your upper lip. Let wisdom steal a march on your mustache. Keep your mind from women, or you may get a wife who will do you up."

"You see," explained Berlong, "our friend had a wife who handed him over to the police, and that, too, when he had always been very indulgent and kind to her."

Mrs. Stannard remembered how Percy had first neglected and then abused her; how he had deliberately flaunted crime and his criminal associates before her, to shock her; how he had tried to cast her off and marry another woman; and how he had more than once beaten her.

And now all the blame was laid to her!

Berthrong evinced a strong inclination to get interested in the supposed Cuban, and was about to press the acquaintance, as the latter saw with alarm. She did not feel able to endure it. Luckily, the danger was for the time averted.

Other men entered the room, and the foremost spoke hurriedly:

"I think, Brown, you had better go to The Nest?"

"Why?" Berthrong asked.

"Men are sulking around there, and they don't look at all like the police. We think they must be of the gang who were in the stable, last night."

"Ah! then they are after—"

"Yes."

The messenger finished the ex-sport's sentence, after the latter paused. The Cuban would have given much if Percy had said all. They were after—whom? Was it Clarice Walbridge?

Berthrong meditated. He did not seem to be greatly discomposed by the tidings, but did recognize the gravity of the situation. He walked across the room several times with his head lowered, while every one watched him, and nobody more anxiously than the spy. Would he betray what she so much wanted to know?

"I suppose I may as well go over and see about this," he finally remarked. "I run the risk of being pulled in, every time I step outside, but I fancy my race is not yet run. It's a feeling of triumph to walk right among the police and not have them recognize me."

The Cuban did not wonder that, having escaped the view of those who actually knew him, Berthrong had not been suspected. His hair, which had been cut close when he was a "sport," and worn long and straight as Brown, the printer, was now rumpled up in a disorderly way; he had a heavy, drooping mustache which looked very real, and a few artistic lines in his face had made him appear ten years older and twenty pounds lighter.

He suddenly turned to the visitor.

"Costa, do you want to go with me?"

The Cuban's heart began to beat fast.

"I shall be pleased to," was the answer, made with difficulty.

"Come on, then."

Whither? This was the question in the Cuban's mind. Had he been recognized? But no; long acquaintance with the man and his ways made the Cuban feel safe on that point. The only danger was that the discovery would come later.

It was clear that Percy had taken a fancy to Mr. Costa, and really wanted his company. Ordinarily he was chary of confiding in a stranger, but he trusted in Berlong's judgment, that man being noted for care and prudence in such matters.

The ex-sport made ready for the street, and the ex-wife felt the greatest trial of her life was coming. Could she continue to deceive both

his eyes and ears? If she was recognized she could expect no more than speedy attack, for his fury would break loose from all restraint.

She would have declined to go with him, even at the last moment, had it not been for her strangely firm resolution to aid Clarice Walbridge.

They left the house. Then, for the first time, Percy had a chance to see his companion's face in strong light, but he did not improve the chance. His spirits had gone up with a rush, and he talked airily without reference to any serious subject.

Presently, however, they met a patrolman. He looked narrowly at the supposed Cuban, and at him only, but Berthrong fancied the scrutiny was for himself. This made him cautious, and he thereafter used his eyes with unceasing vigilance.

Suddenly he touched his companion's arm.

"Don't look around," he cautioned; "but we are followed."

"Followed?"

"Yes. A peculiar-looking man has been dogging us for three blocks, and how much longer I don't know. Probably he is a detective, though, if so, he must be disguised. Somebody is after us, sure."

The ex-sport did not seem much troubled, but it was a peculiar feeling for the Cuban. Of course, as an associate of Berthrong's, Juan would come in for a share of suspicion. It was not pleasant to be dogged.

CHAPTER XII.

A MYSTERIOUS SHADOW.

THE convict did not recover from his feeling of uneasiness, and presently added:

"Let's us stop and light a couple of cigars, and while about it we will pretend to have trouble to find matches. Gradually we will face toward the pursuer, and not only have more chance to get onto his appearance, but we'll see how he will take our stop."

This plan was carried out. The Cuban pleaded a headache as an excuse for declining to smoke, but, further than that he entered into the scheme satisfactorily. While both pretended to hunt for matches, they secretly watched the pursuer.

The latter did not come up to them. Instead, he no sooner saw them pause than he did the same, pretending to be deeply interested in a window and its exhibited goods.

He was peculiar looking. He was tall and slender, and of ministerial cast in certain ways. He was dressed all in black, and his coat buttoned so closely, and so directly under his chin that, at a slight distance, no collar was visible. He had, however, a thin, but very long mustache, of deep black, which curved outward and downward over his mouth until it almost touched the point of his chin.

There was something almost weird about him, and Berthrong arrived at a conclusion:

"Disguised, sure!"

"He looks like it."

"Sure! He's a police spy. Ten years ago he was probably a patrolman, intent only on flirting with servant girls, and making saloons pay him for not observing that they were open at illegal hours. He rose to be a detective, and that's why he's dogging us."

With this summary of the supposed history of the unknown, Percy lighted his cigar and they moved on.

"The Man in Black follows," he added.

"Do you apprehend arrest?" Juan asked.

"I don't know, but this much is certain: I can't go where I intended. That trip is off. We will take a walk, and then go back. Suppose we ride to Central Park, and stroll around a bit?"

This was just what the Cuban did not want to do. It was a constant horror to be in the ex-sport's company, and as there seemed to be no hope of seeing Clarice Walbridge on that occasion, the sooner such dangerous company was deserted the better.

Juan, therefore, pleaded lack of time, and Berthrong did not insist. They prepared to separate, and this state of affairs brought them for the first time facing each other in good light. The ex-sport was saying something, but he stopped short and stared blankly at his companion.

The Cuban's nerve rose with the occasion. Producing a cigarette he drawled:

"Give us a light, please. I won't search for any dayvillish matches."

Percy started, extended his lighted cigar mechanically, and then suddenly aroused.

"Shoot me if you don't look in the eyes like

some one I've seen before, though I fail to place the resemblance now."

"I've been told that all Cubans look alike."

With this comment Juan was about to make a fresh effort to get away, but at that moment another person appeared on the scene. He had come up unnoticed; a rough, slovenly, dissipated-looking fellow; and he pulled at Berthrong's sleeve before he gained attention. He gave Juan fresh cause for uneasiness, for he had been a neighbor when the ex-sport and his wife were together, and was a peculiarly shrewd person in many ways.

Another danger must be faced.

"What is it, Con?" Percy asked.

"I'm after wantin' a word wid you in private, sor."

"Speak right out; it's all right, Con."

"It's about your wife."

"Well, what of her?"

"Sure, I've found out she has left Harding Otis's, sor, an' gone back to that whelp ave a boy, Foxy Fred. I do be thinkin' you would do well ter be on the lookout. There's no knowin' what disguise she might take this time, she worked it so n'ately before."

"She's as cunning as the Evil One, but I'll beat her—unless she gets in the first blow."

"Your trouble is that you won't know her when you see her," cautioned Con. "Now, she niver could fool me; let me set me two eyes on her, an' I would know her in spite ave all the disguises she put on. You're a good man, sor, an' if you'll let me act as your body-guard, I'll agree to take care ave you. I'll look sharp at every man who is near you, and I defy her to get in range ave me eyes an' k'ape her saycret; I do, that. I'd know her first off, begorra!"

The Cuban had turned his back and was looking at the goods in a show window. Con could not see his face; he dared not let him see it.

"I'm very much obliged, Con," replied Berthrong, "but it never would do. You and I were once neighbors, as many of my enemies know, and it would be a dead give-away if you were seen near me."

"But I'd k'ape well back."

"I know, but it would be a constant danger, all the same. One man can't follow another without the fact being noticed by those interested in the person followed."

The ex-sport looked back uneasily at the Man in Black, who was still keeping up his show of looking in the window, but Con, greatly disappointed, stood in silent irresolution. Then he looked at the Cuban, meditated, and made a decision.

Stepping forward he brought his big hand down heavily on Juan's shoulder, with a hearty slap.

If the world had gone to pieces with a crash it would not have been much more startling to the Cuban. His heart seemed to collapse, and he instinctively turned to face the danger.

"Say, young feller!" exclaimed Con, "take keer ave the boss, will you's?"

If Con had been in the mood of ordinary discernment the dismay and alarm on the Cuban's face must have attracted his attention, but he was so wrapped up in his own ideas that he could see nothing, and understand nothing.

"You's a friend of his," the speaker added, "and if we don't stand by our friends, who will?"

The Cuban experienced another revulsion of feeling. When the heavy hand descended on his shoulder he had felt sure he was recognized; now, it was clear that Con was still unsuspecting. It required a great effort to get control of voice, expression and composure, but he managed to reply calmly:

"I'll do what I can, sir, but, begad! I'm thinking I may need somebody's care, myself."

An expressive shrug of the shoulders seemed to convey a good deal, and Con smiled broadly.

"You furriners is a queer lot," he remarked, "but your hearts are in the right place. Boss," to Berthrong, "you think me company on the streets moight not be healthy to you, so I'm off. K'ape your eye open. I'll see you ag'in."

He went, much to the Cuban's relief, and never suspecting that his boast of being able to recognize the ex-sport's wife in any disguise had already been put to the test and demolished.

Berthrong scarcely heeded his departure.

"The Man in Black troubles me," he observed, seriously.

"Do you really think he is dogging you?"

"Yes."

The Cuban looked in thoughtful silence. He had no means of knowing who the shadower was, but he rather hoped that the man would keep his hands off. It was not time to arrest the ex-sport—Clarice Walbridge was not found.

"Let us move on," Percy suggested. "I want

to test this fellow, further. Keep with me until it is decided. We will go down this side-street, and if he follows I shall know he is dogging me."

The plan was carried out. They did not look around until the whole block had been traversed. Then, as a fresh survey was taken, it was seen that the Man in Black had disappeared.

"I guess you were mistaken," remarked Juan. "Perhaps so," Berthrong admitted, "but I do not feel at all sure of it. We will go on."

They went, but he was not so sociable as before. His mind was on the supposed shadower, and his conversation was broken. This did not trouble the Cuban; he was perfectly willing it should be so. It took attention away from him.

For several blocks they walked on, and then Percy suddenly touched his companion's arm.

"Look!" he directed.

Juan obeyed. On the opposite side of the street the Man in Black was at his old trick of looking into a show-window, but he plainly had his attention upon them, also.

"As I thought; he's dogging me!" the ex-sport declared. "Now, I'll throw him off the track or break my neck. In order to do it I must leave you; but you'll call again, won't you, Mr. Costa?"

"Yes."

"Do so; I shall be glad to see you. I'll try to show you what New York is like, and I tell you it is the most glorious city on the face of the earth. We have the cream of America, and in a short time no European city will be in it with our great metropolis. But this is not to the point. Good-day! I'm off!"

Shaking the Cuban's hand, Percy ran out and spring on a street-car.

Resolved to try an experiment, the Cuban slipped quickly into a cigar-store, and from the window secretly watched the Man in Black. The latter had turned away from the window. He looked after the car, and he looked searchingly up and down the street.

Juan rightly suspected that, in watching Berthrong, the shadower had lost sight of him, and was anxious to locate him again. Failing in this, the Man in Black made a decision. He boarded a car and follow after the ex-sport.

Costa now perceived that he was really shadowing Percy, but the impression that there was some unusual mystery about the man grew in the Cuban's mind.

Who, and what, was he?

An ordinary detective? If so, why did he not seize his prey while he had a chance?

"I won't bother about it," thought the disguised woman, with a sigh. "Let me be thankful I have passed through so many perils in safety. Yes; and as I am established as Juan Costa, a future is before me. I'll go to them again; I'll go hoping to help Clarice. Providence help me if my identity becomes known!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BLOW OF THE BEARDED BAND.

It was evening.

Two boys were strolling along a side street. One was Foxy Fred; the other was, to all appearances, a colored boy of about the Keener's own age.

"We ain't goin' ter git no p'inters ter-night," Fred remarked, with dissatisfaction.

"It looks like it."

"Bad, by gum! I'm jest spoilin' fer a brush with the pestiferous enemy."

"It may be better for us. Although it is my plan, I don't know as it is safe for me to be seen with you in any guise."

"Singin' skeeters! nobody would suspect you was Mary Stannard."

"Hush!"

"Oh! I didn't breathe the name until I was dead sure nobody else would hear it. I intend ter be as wily as a Bowery thimble-rigger. Yes, old boss: you are Jeff Washington, a colored gent, an' nobody else."

Mrs. Stannard smiled. Once more she had shown her remarkable faculty for planning and perfecting a disguise, and in Jeff Washington there was no suggestion of Juan Costa or Mary Stannard, so Fred asserted, and he momentarily grew more and more proud of his detective comrade.

They had made no discoveries on the trip, and as the hour was growing late, they decided that further search would be useless.

"This is a dark and forbidding street," added Mrs. Stannard, "and I do not care to risk anything. We will turn back, at once."

She suited the action to the word, and Fred followed the example, but the peaceful return upon which they counted was not to take place. A strong hand suddenly grasped the supposed

colored boy by the collar and hurled him against the wall of the adjacent building. He then fell to the sidewalk and lay perfectly still, apparently senseless.

As for the Keener, he saw three men confronting him, and one sternly exclaimed:

"Boy, you are our prisoner. Don't dare to call for help. We will kill you if you do!"

"Kill" is a big word, mister," returned the unabashed Keener. "You ain't no New Yorker, or you wouldn't use sech expressions. Say, d'ye think ye kin blow in here from the wilds of Arizony, Canada or Weehawken, an' bluff a city gent like me?"

Fred talked glibly, but he was not idle in other ways. He was trying to defer trouble, and in the meanwhile he used his eyes freely.

There was good cause to say the men were not New Yorkers. There was that about them which proved it at once. On the contrary, they had a certain freedom of dress, and picturesque disorder of hair and beard, which made his reference to Arizona seem not inappropriate.

Nevertheless, they were keen and alert, and had an ample supply of a certain kind of intelligence.

They let him finish, and then, seeing he had nothing of importance to say, the spokesman pulled at his collar.

"Come!" he tersely directed.

"Where?"

"You will learn that, later."

"I want ter learn now. I don't go ter walk with no gent without finding out jest w'ot he's drivin' at, you bet. Besides, I don't like the way you used a poor little black kid."

Foxy Fred looked anxiously at Mrs. Stannard, who remained motionless. His first idea had been that it was she at whom the attack was aimed, but as no further attention was given her, he changed his mind. He was afraid, however, that she had been injured by the fall.

The man showed a disposition to delay which was not then easy to understand, and in the meanwhile a carriage came briskly down the street. Fred had an eye on it, and when it came nearly opposite him, he suddenly cried:

"Hi! mister, this way! I'm bein' done up by mean skunks. Help!"

The carriage pulled up by the curbstone. The Keener's face fell when he saw the driver calmly keep his seat, and one of the other men open the vehicle door, but before he could form any new plan of action, he was flung unceremoniously inside, his captors followed, and the carriage resumed its way.

"Look here!"

Fred looked, and saw a revolver.

"I don't think you want to throw your life away," the speaker added. "Be silent, and you will avoid all trouble."

"Trouble? Say! w'ot d'ye call the dif, I am in, now? Ef this ain't trouble, w'ot is it? You may think it's fun, but I don't. W'ot are you tryin' ter do?"

"For a while you are our prisoner. Ask no questions about it, and all will be well."

It was a very cool direction, for the Keener believed he had more interest, and more cause to ask questions than any one else, but it was clear that he could not successfully resist three men and a revolver, so he did not attempt it. His first, natural idea that he owed the attack to Percy Berthrong had been abandoned, and he was curious, as well as troubled by the situation.

These men, he felt sure, would let nothing stand in the way of their purpose.

The journey was not long, and they drew up in front of one of a row of miserable houses. He was told they were to enter, and sternly cautioned not to make any outcry or resistance.

If he had seen any one to whom he could appeal, the warning might have been ignored, but nobody was at hand. He was obliged to suffer himself to be led into the house.

He was conducted to the back parlor, and the bearded trio again confronted him. There was no mercy in their faces or manner.

"Boy," began the spokesman, "what is your name?"

"Call me Blicketty."

"No jesting, sir."

"I don't know ez I'm obliged ter giv a family pedigree. Ef you don't know who I be, you ought ter hev found out afore you gobbled me."

"We have seen you before."

"Oh! hev you?"

"And you've seen us."

"Where?"

"At a certain stable which I need not name."

"Oh! be you the gorillas in the masks?"

"We were the masked men," was the frigid

reply. "Now, where are those who were then with you?"

"Don't know."

"It is false! Of course you know, and you must tell. One of the party was a man called Brown. In all probability the name is fictitious. We want to know his real name, who and what he is, and what game he is playing. You were one of his companions, and must know what we wish to learn. You are to tell us this."

Foxy Fred had grown interested. These men had captured Harding Otis and turned their revolvers upon him, and they desired to know all about Berthrong. The Keener lost his apprehensions in keen curiosity, and at that moment he was rather glad he was in their company.

His meditations were cut short by the sharp order:

"Speak out! We will have no trifling. Speak out!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KEENER'S CAPTIVITY.

"MISTER," replied Foxy Fred, diplomatically, "it is possible that we may be able to make a bargain—"

"I have no bargain to make!" sharply interrupted the spokesman of the strangers. "You are our prisoner; you are in our power. We want information, and we're going to have it. Now, understand me: We are not your enemies; we have nothing against you. You never did us any harm, and we don't want to harm you. Tell us what we want to know and you can go free, safe and sound. Refuse, however, and we'll force the truth from you, if need be, by torture!"

He spoke with candor that was impressive, and as Foxy Fred did not feel wholly at ease sitting there with the grim trio for companions, he replied:

"Drive on, mister!"

"Who is the man Brown?"

"A crook."

"What is his real name?"

"Percy Berthrong."

"What is his line of crooked work?"

"Confidence man, bunco-steerer, an' so on."

"No more?"

"Not ez I know of. Ye see, he ain't in actyve business life, now. He an' the police had a little misunderstandin', a few months ago, an' they invited him ter go ter State's Prison fer a vacation. I dare say they had a room all selected fer him, with clean sheets on the bed an' costly paintin's on the wall, but Perce didn't move in. On the contrary he jest shook his keepers here in New York, an' sence then he's been hidin' from them. The fact that they wanted ter put him in has put him out."

The Keener smiled at his own joke, but no one else did.

"You are in his confidence, of course."

"Not much. He's dead ag'inst me."

"I know better."

"Ask him."

"I would if I had a chance. Now, see here: What do you know about a girl who was stolen from a house up Murray Hill way? The owner of the house was one Harding Otis."

Foxy Fred opened his eyes widely. A question of more interest to him was, what did these men know about the circumstance? And what did they care about it? His silence was not allowed to grow to undue length.

"Where is she?" added the spokesman.

"I don't know."

"Be careful, boy!"

"I'm givin' you a straight deal, mister."

"Why will you be so idiotically stubborn? You are a friend of this Berthrong, and, no doubt, well informed as to his affairs. You must know where the girl is. Tell us that and we will not only guarantee you good usage, but give you fifty dollars if you will inform us at once."

"What do you want o' her?"

"That is our business. Don't expect us to return any confidence. You can't expect it. The power is with us, and we shall use it without mercy."

This was plain enough, but Foxy Fred's naturally inquisitive nature was not to be kept down. He persisted in his truthful statement that he did not know where Clarice was, and, occasionally, interjected a question seeking to get some light in return. He was devoured with curiosity to know who his companions were, and what interest they had in the matter.

His pertinacity seemed to show them the folly of trying to check it, but, instead, all of his questions were ignored. As for his assertion that he could tell no more, the spokesman was evidently somewhat influenced. He left one of

his companions to guard the prisoner, and went aside with the other, for consultation.

When they returned, pen, paper and ink were placed before the Keener.

"Write!" order the leader.

"What?"

"What I tell you. Begin thus: 'Percy Berthrong. Dear friend—'"

"Say, who's goin' ter sign this?" Fred demanded.

"You."

"Singin' 'skeeters! the idee o' my addressin' Perce as 'Dear friend!' Why, man, you're crazy as a man who thinks all his political party is square."

"Go on!" angrily cried the leader. "Write as I tell you, or you never will leave here alive." "That settles it. Reel off yer rhetoric, an' I'll write English, French, Choctaw or Hunter's Point dialect."

The letter, when written, was certainly a remarkable composition from the Keener's point of view. It read as follows:

"PERCY BERTHRONG:—

"DEAR FRIEND:—I am in trubble, an' wood like you're assistance without Delaigh. I fownd owt That They wuz ou 2 ovr sch em abowt Clarriss, an' That They wuz goin' 2 Git Hir away unless I took proomp' mazuress 2 keep her away from Them, so I changed Hir abowd an' bro't Hir hear. Kum 2 this number an' talk charge ov Hir agen. Will You! I don't feel able ter do it. That's w'ot My trubble is.

"I hav' Diskovered a good 'eel w'itch We Did knot no befour. Unless you are verry kwick you are liabell 2 Bee seezed an' incusserateat-d in priz'n.

"You Are a square man, an' I like you. You no you can depend Onto Me, 2. We will Help One another. Kum at once.

"Yore trew friend,

"FOXY FRED."

There had been no especial need of the Keener giving his real name, but the humor of the situation had appealed to him so strongly that he could not resist the temptation. If the letter really was delivered to Berthrong, that "dear friend" would be staggered by it.

The leader read the missive through.

"Where did you learn to spell?" he asked.

"Berthrong taught me," was the demure reply. "He is a graduate of Yale College, an' he put me onter the Yale system."

For a moment the faintest trace of a smile was visible on the man's face. He never had seen worse spelling—nor had Fred. He did not claim to be perfect, but he had willfully outdone himself in bad spelling, this time.

"Put Berthrong's address on this envelope," the leader added.

The joke lost force. It never would do to send the letter to the house where "Juan Costa" had seen the ex-sport, for this would cause the gang to move out at once. The only chance left was to address it to Berthrong's printing-office, and this he did. The leader did not seem favorably impressed by this, but after considerable questioning, he had to be content. One of his men was sent with the decoy.

"Now, I s'pose I go?" questioned the Keener.

"No; you await Berthrong's coming."

"Whew! then I'll winter with ye. I tell you fair that he hates me like p'izon."

"I prefer my own opinion. I shall hold you until I know you can't give him warning, to keep him away. Our business, boy, is not of trivial nature. We have a great work to do, and we shall do it, though one-half of New York opposes us. Through blood, if necessary, we go to attain our end, and woe be to those who oppose us. Death is likely to be their reward. I give you fair warning; beware how you trifle with us!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN IN BLACK.

THE Keener argued the matter no more. He had seen that this was folly, and he settled down to take matters as calmly as possible. He had considerable faith in the unknown's assertion that they did not seek to harm him, though he was of the opinion that a gale would blow around his ears when they saw that Berthrong was not to be entrapped thus.

These men interested Foxy Fred.

Who were they?

What did they want of Clarice?

These and other questions floated through his mind as he sat and watched them in the silence which followed.

In a certain way they were impressive of appearance. Their faces were intelligent; their physical proportions, muscular. Then their appearance of having come from some distant land; their bronzed skins and bushy beards;

their grim and grave air; their serious way of taking all things—these peculiarities made them impressive.

"New Yorkers would order up a pitcher o' beer an' settle down fer a game o' poker," thought the Keener, "but they set like Quakers in meetin'."

They were more patient than he, for they kept their positions calmly, long after he had grown nervous; but then, he knew that delay would be an utter failure. Nothing in his favor was to be expected; trouble was to be looked for.

The monotony of the affair was finally broken. A woman knocked at the door, and when she was admitted, she held out a card—which, plainly, was not an orthodox "visiting" card—and announced:

"A gentleman to see Eldred."

This seemed to be the name of the leader. He took the card, and presently passed it to his companion. They conferred for a moment, and then turned to the Keener.

"Boy," said Eldred, "both of us wish to see this man, and as we want to be sure of your presence when we return, we shall have to put you under a trifle of restraint."

"In w'ot way?"

"Simply to bind your hands, and tie you to yonder sofa."

"I ain't old enough ter vote, an' I s'pose you'll do ez you please," Fred replied, ungraciously.

Their idea was carried out, and they then left the room. The Keener was alone; the window was near; but he was perfectly helpless.

"Frederick Walsingham Mather," he remarked, "you can't drag this furniture through the winder with ye, so you'll hev to take things as coolly as you kin. You may not lose anything by bein' with the Bearded Brethren—unless its your head!"

He smiled humorously, for nothing could dampen his spirits; but at that moment the door reopened. He looked, expecting to see one of the bearded men, but what he really did see gave him a surprise.

It was a tall, semi-ministerial-looking person, and one not unheard of by Foxy Fred.

"The Man in Black!" he unconsciously muttered, remembering Mrs. Stannara's account of the man.

It flashed upon him that the standing of the mysterious shadower was fixed, and that he was proven an ally of the Bearded Brethren, but the new-comer quickly made that theory doubtful. He crossed the room with long, light steps and stood by the Keener's side.

"Do you want to escape?" he asked, in a low, gentle voice.

"Do I? Wal, try me an' see!"

"You will not be precipitate?"

"W'ot's that?"

"Hasty, headlong. We must go out slyly if at all, or we never shall get out."

"Mister, I'm on! Set me free, an' you shall see I kin be assecreat as a mouse after cheese. Let'er go!"

Deftly the Man in Black untied the cords, and Fred rose up and stretched his limbs, once more free.

"You're a brick!" he declared.

"We must waste no words or time. Follow me, but abate not your caution for a moment. We must pass near the enemy, and though I may pause for a moment to see what is the drift of their remarks, all may be ruined, in any case, by indiscretion."

"Don't you worry," impatiently advised the boy.

The Man in Black said no more, and they passed into the next room. The Keener quickly caught on to the situation. The two Bearded Brethren and their caller were there, and it would have been impossible to pass them had they not been seated behind a fancy screen. Why they were there was not certain, unless it was in the line of habitual practice of secrecy, but it had worked against them, now. It enabled the Man in Black to enter, and the latter and Fred might now have gone out at once, but the leader stopped and made a motion of caution.

They were close to the screen, and everything said there was plainly audible.

Eldred was speaking.

"As for us," he explained, "we are in New York by order of the Committee of Death."

"You are fortunate."

"The Power has spoken, and we obey."

"You have come a long ways."

"Yes; and on an old trail. Those long lost sight of have been relocated; hence, our mission."

"Who is the recreant brother?"

"Our mission concerns a woman—a girl."

"Ah! then your work is not pleasant."

"'Tis the will of the Power."

"I know, and I doubt not you will do the work well. But the few women admitted to the order rarely come under the ban thus."

"In this case she never was admitted. The case is peculiar, and more unpleasant than you suspect. Very likely the doomed one never heard of th Power. With her," added Eldred, somberly, "another must fall. He is a recreant brother."

"When is the deed to be done?"

"Not until our hands are on the girl. We have been troubled by lack of knowledge of the city, and when victory has seemed in our grasp, some mischance has put us all at fault. Soon, however, we shall have our prey. When our grasp is on her, look out for a sensation in which a rich man shall figure as the victim. His name is Harding Otis."

Foxy Fred looked at the Man in Black, but the latter's face was immobile. If this conversation conveyed any particular meaning to him, he gave no evidence of the fact.

But the Keener began to see more clearly how the rich man stood.

"Slay without mercy," advised the visitor.

"The order has not yet come. He is duly doomed, and has been warned, in order to render his few remaining days of life more wretched, but the full decree of the Power is not yet at hand. When it comes, he dies!"

The cool and relentless way in which these words were spoken made Foxy Fred shiver. It might be true, as the Bearded Brethren had said, that they had nothing against him, but he would prefer other company to theirs.

The Man in Black shook his head. Fred suspected it was because he was annoyed at not hearing anything of direct value to him. He grew more attentive to outside things, too, and after a pause, motioned toward the door.

They started, but, just as that point was reached, and they stood by the passage from the parlor to the hall, the outside door was opened. A man entered.

Foxy Fred started. It was the absent Bearded Brother, and he was in their path of escape.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEHIND THE DOOR.

If Eldred's messenger had been looking toward the parlor door he must have seen the escaping pair, at once, but he turned a little to one side as he entered, and the Man in Black was not slow to improve the opportunity.

He seized Foxy Fred and drew him behind the parlor door, and by the time the messenger had closed the outer one, he had nobody within range of his vision. He walked into the parlor, and at sound of his footsteps Eldred rose.

"So it's you? What luck?"

"None. I found nobody."

"How was that?"

"The printing-office was closed, and I saw no sign of life. There was a bell, and I rung it until I was afraid I would pull the walls down. No one came, and I could only infer that nobody was inside."

"I am not surprised. The boy is an obstinate fellow, and I feared he might make us trouble, but I think we can bend his stiff neck. We'll see him again!"

Eldred started for the parlor, and, as there was no chance for Fred and his companion to make their escape, the former glanced uneasily at the Man in Black. That person, however, was as stoical as ever.

The leader of the bearded men paused.

"We will wait awhile," he added. "A brother is here; you can meet him. We will attend to the boy, later. He tells his secret tonight, or—"

The pause was quite as significant as words would have been.

The late messenger joined the others and was duly introduced to the visitor. Conversation was then renewed, but not on matters of interest to Foxy Fred. All, it appeared, were total strangers in New York, and they spoke of the place as strangers naturally would. As this did not concern Fred and the Man in Black they would gladly have said farewell to the scene, but this they could not do. The addition of one to the party by the screen made room so scarce that one sat wholly beyond cover, and facing directly toward the hall.

Fred and his ally were prisoners behind the door.

Naturally, the Keener was disposed to let the Man in Black act as leader, but he looked at him without getting any sign in return. The man was motionless as a statue. If he had any

plans he did not seek to take Fred into his confidence—all of which was very unpleasant to the latter.

He might have to act without a definite plan. Finally one of the bearded men advised:

"Close the door. We are too public here. I don't know the ways of New York, but I should imagine a closed parlor door would keep others out."

His theories were not of interest to the fugitives, but his plan was. Once let that door swing away from the wall and they would be revealed. Then—The Keener set his teeth tightly. What then?

He who had made the suggestion rose to carry it out. He advanced to within two yards of the door, but Eldred interrupted:

"Let us retire to our own quarters, and then we shall be sure that we will not be troubled. Come!"

He set the example, and the others rose. The foremost man paused with his hand outstretched to lay hold of the door, and then followed his comrades. All went toward the back parlor. Fred nudged the Man in Black. It was clear that his escape would be discovered at once, and no time was to be lost.

The fugitives glided from their cover and gained the hall unseen. Eagerly the Keener laid his hand on the knob of the outer door. He turned it; the door yielded; they passed out.

"Singin' skeeters! ain't this prime!" he exclaimed.

"Get away rapidly," the Man in Black ordered. "By diligent use of our legs we may manage to avoid being seen, and if we can throw some mystery about your escape, it will be a wholesome lesson to them."

No more was said until the end of the block was reached. There was still no sign of pursuers, and the leader paused around the corner.

"We part here," he announced.

"Wal, mister, I'm mightily obliged to you, sure. You pulled me out of a fix that might have growed hot for me. I'm yours truly. Guess you ain't no friend o' that gang?"

"I am not."

"How'd you git in?"

"I watched my chance," was the evasive response.

"Wal, why did you come in?"

"Are you sorry I came?"

"No, but—"

"I thought you would not be."

Foxy Fred perceived that he was not advancing any. He hesitated, and, before he could say more, the Man in Black added:

"You noticed what they said about some girl?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where she is?"

"No; I wish I did. Do you?"

"Certainly not. Well, my young friend, I will not trouble you with my company any more. It is bed-time for both of us. We separate here, but you will, of course, have no further trouble in keeping clear of the men we have just left. I would impress upon you the fact that they deliberately spoke of taking human life. See to it, that you don't fall into their hands again."

"I won't; but say, mister, before you go I would like some light on this matter. You are a mystery ter me. May I ask who you be?"

"Possibly a man from a remote land, like them; possibly not. Now I will leave—"

"But w'ot game be you workin' in New York?"

"I am not in regular business. Good-night!"

This time he did not wait for an answer, but walked rapidly away. Foxy Fred watched him, chagrined and disappointed.

"No use," he agreed. "Mr. Man in Black is bound ter keep his own secret, an' I see no way ter prevent it. He grows more an' more mysterious. He don't belong ter the Bearded Brethren, unless he's w'ot they call a recreant, an' his work in New York is as much of a puzzle as ever. But it's him; he looks jest like Mrs. Stannard said. Can't be another jest like him in town. Wal, Mr. Mystery, I'll bid you so-long fer now. I wonder where my detective comrades is."

The Keener's thoughts were suddenly recalled to the fact that he had left her lying prostrate on the sidewalk, and he returned to that point. He was not surprised when he failed to find any trace of her.

Next he went to their quarters, where he was relieved to see Mrs. Stannard, in her proper character. Her own expression told how much pleasure his return gave her.

"Thank Providence, you are back!" she exclaimed. "I have been terribly worried."

"Mum, the Keener tribe always turn up all right. But you—be you hurt?"

"No. I was momentarily stunned by my fall, and when I recovered, you and our assailants were gone. Who were they? What has happened? Have you been a prisoner? If so, how did you escape?"

"The Man in Black did it."

"Is it possible?"

"It's so possible that you wouldn't see me here if it hadn't been for him. But this is how it come about," and thereupon Fred told the whole story.

It left Mrs. Stannard in a state of perplexity equal to his own.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOME ONE ELSE THREATENS.

THE following morning Harding Otis had a caller. No card was sent up, and his only information was that a boy wished to see him. After some hesitation he went down, and at once recognized Foxy Fred.

"Ah! so it's you?"

"Et ain't nobody else. I hope I don't disturb ye in any active pursuit, but I called on biz. Anything new sence I see you last?"

"No," Otis returned, sourly.

"No furdur sight o' the men who tried ter revolver you in the stable, eh?"

"No."

"Say, mister, who was them fellers?"

"Really, I can't say," was the stiff reply.

"Some city gang, perhaps. Have you come here to bring up that past-and-gone affair?"

"There ain't no visible need o' your bein' so cranky about it," retorted the Keener. "Ef you want ter sail light, do et; you needn't tell me yer secrets, by gum! But I ain't goin' ter be bluffed out o' tellin' why I am here, ef it does concern you alone, fer it might result ter your hurt. Fact is, I hev reason ter believe I hev seen them ag'in, an' w'ot they remarked was just w'ot you ought ter know. They, or somebody else, are goin' ter do you up!"

"How do you know?"

"Heerd them say so. Fact is, they gobbled me, had me pris'ner, an' talked in my hearin'. Who they was I don't know, except that one was called Eldred, an' they had come from a distance. More than all, they hev planned ter kill you."

"You heard them say that?"

Otis's manner was no longer indifferent, and the Keener was duly encouraged.

"I did, that; an' there's another they're goin' ter kill. She's a girl. Who kin she be?"

Foxy Fred watched his companion sharply, and the latter's change of expression told a good deal. Really, it was no news to him, but mental distress was visibly betrayed.

"Tell me all about this," he requested, in a voice which certainly had no curtness.

The Keener told as much as he saw fit. He did not mention Mrs. Stannard, but spoke of his captivity; the conversation he had overheard, there, and his rescue by the Man in Black. Otis was an attentive listener, though he asked but few questions. When he had heard all he rose and began to pace the room with his forehead thoughtfully knit and his head lowered. Finally he paused in front of the visitor.

"Did they seem sincere in trying to force from you the whereabouts of the parties named?" he asked.

"Yes."

Again Otis began to walk his beat.

"Do you know anything about it?" Fred asked.

Otis suddenly recovered his caution.

"I don't think I do. Of course we are all liable to have enemies, and I have been going over the list of all the men I know who could possibly have anything against me, but the only result is that I think it is all a mistake. These men doubtless live at a distance, as you have suspected, and have come to New York to pay off some real, or imaginary, grudge. By some mischance they have erroneously settled upon me as their man, but they are wrong. Perhaps, too, they are not half so bad as they tried to make out; their talk was not of the kind usually heard at this day. This Committee of Death and Power business is ridiculous."

While he was speaking Foxy Fred read between the lines, and it was very evident to him that no amount of urging would make Otis confide in him.

He did not attempt it.

"All right, mister," he replied. "Ef you kin afford ter ignore the matter, I can."

The Keener arose and made ready to depart.

"I thank you for your kindness in coming

here," added Otis, the natural courtesy of a gentleman breaking through his reserve. "It shows your good will, and I am grateful. If—if you learn anything—anything more, I really should like to have you come again."

It was an after-thought, dictated by prudence, and he struggled somewhat over the choice of words. Fred was shrewd enough to suspect that he really felt deeply troubled, and did not allow the want of confidence to vex him.

"I'll do it," he agreed.

Then he left the house.

Once more alone, Harding Otis resumed his thoughtful pacing, but was soon interrupted by the coming of a servant.

"Mrs. Otis would like to see you, sir, in her room."

"Very well."

The interruption was rather timely. Mrs. Otis had been a model wife, in his opinion, and though he could not confide in her and receive her sympathy, he was not reluctant to have a chat with her. It would soothe his troubled spirit. So he reasoned, but when he entered her room he was unpleasantly undeceived.

First of all she locked the door, and then she confronted him. He noticed that her face was rigid and her eyes flashing, and he began to be amazed.

"I have something to say to you, sir!" she announced, frigidly.

"You have?" he answered mechanically.

"I certainly have. Who am I?"

"Who are you? My dear, are you ill?"

"Answer me, sir!"

He was sincerely troubled. Had she gone insane? He gently replied:

"You are Mrs. Otis, my wife."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure?"

She clinched her hand angrily.

"Can you do nothing but repeat my words, parrot-like? Yes; I ask you again, are you sure? That I have been called Mrs. Otis is true, but are you sure I am your wife? Do I legally hold that position, or is it some other woman's?"

"You amaze me! I cannot feel that you would jest idly on such a subject, and I am forced to take you seriously, though all in the dark. Are you my wife? Most emphatically, yes; no one else has any claim on me, and your right is unimpeachable."

She smiled scornfully.

"The reply was to be expected, but can you prove it, sir?"

"I can prove that any claim to the contrary is false," Otis declared.

"On the other hand, I am afraid others could prove it to be true. I have been informed that you had a wife before you ever met me, and she is still living!"

"Who dares make the charge?"

"I notice that you don't deny it."

"I do deny that any woman upon the face of the earth has any claim upon me, save you."

His manner was so honest that, for a moment, Mrs. Otis wavered, but she then tore a letter from her pocket and flung it at him.

"Read that!" she directed.

He looked first at the envelope. It was superscribed in a bold hand, and bore the New York post-mark. Further than this he read nothing from the outside, and his delay to seek further information brought a bitter smile to Mrs. Otis's lips.

"You hesitate," she remarked. "What do you expect to find within that need startle you?"

He nervously drew out the letter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE VICTIM STRIKES BACK.

Making a pretense that the light was poor, Harding Otis gained a little time by going to the window. Forcing himself to a measure of calmness he read the letter, which was as follows:

"MADAM:—In justice to you, and as a kindness, I write this to notify you that unknown to yourself, you are occupying a false position in the eyes of the world. It will be painful to you to know the truth, but it is best so."

"Before you ever saw Harding Otis he met and married Gladys Marchmont. After a while he found that, while she had many noble qualities, she lacked wealth, refinement, education and intimacy with the ways of polite society."

"Believing the last two, at least, to be essential to the woman of his choice, he, at the end of a year, when his love had cooled, deliberately deserted her."

"Later, he married you."

"I do not wish to meddle with your affairs, but it is a fact that the first—the legal—wife still lives."

I have felt it my duty to acquaint you with these facts.

"With pity and respect, I am, madam, yours with best wishes for the future."

"ONE WHO KNOWS."

Harding Otis needed all of his composure then, and Mrs. Otis read the dismay which was pictured on his face. It seemed to proclaim his guilt. She waited for him to speak, and he nerved himself for the ordeal. Turning, he tried to assume a look of reproach.

"Do you base your charge on this letter?" he asked.

"Isn't it enough?"

"Decidedly not, for it is false. Surely, you would not condemn me on the evidence of an anonymous letter?—always the work of a coward."

"You don't deny it."

"I do deny it, emphatically. The letter is a tissue of falsehoods. I know not who wrote it; possibly it is the concoction of a practical joker, but, more likely, some enemy of mine, failing to reach me in any open and manly way, has taken this method of disturbing my household peace. It is a cowardly attempt, and the letter is an infamous falsehood."

"Don't you know this Gladys Marchmont?"

"I do not."

"The statement is clear."

"On the contrary, it is obscure to a marked degree. If the writer was sincere, why didn't he give you a chance to prove his assertions? Notice how carefully he refrained from mentioning any place. Why didn't he say where the alleged first wife lived, so you could inquire of those who knew her? Why didn't he say where she is now, so you could investigate in that way? Why didn't he give his own name? With all his charges he has not made it possible for any one to prove what he so boldly claims. Does not his insincerity show in every way?"

"You talk well, but I knew long ago that you were cunning. His statements stand until you disprove them."

"The burden of proof rests with the accuser."

"Not in this case."

"How am I to disprove what is false, when I do not know the accuser, or any of the supposed parties to the case?"

Harding Otis talked well, but he did not convince his wife. She had grasped at the accusation, and would not see that, if innocent, her husband could not show its falsity. A logical person would have realized this at once, but logical she was not.

She now rose with a so-called queenly air of anger and pride, such as befitted her rank in life.

"We need not discuss this matter further, but until you have cleared yourself, we live under this roof as strangers, sir."

She moved away.

"Mrs. Otis—"

"I have no more to say, sir!"

She entered her own room, and closed and locked the door.

He hesitated; then went forward and knocked. She ignored the call, and he was forced to go away.

"Cowards!—cowards!" he murmured.

He went to his private room. There he stayed most of the day. Occasionally he left it, hoping to meet his wife, but she kept her seclusion so well that she did not even appear at lunch or dinner. He found himself an exile, but the very fact seemed to arouse all that was combative in his nature. Driven to bay, he did a good deal of thinking, and meditation bore fruit.

After dark he went quietly up to the garret and selected a few articles of clothing which hung there. These he carried to his room, and put on in place of his usual apparel. Thus equipped, he looked wholly unlike himself.

The garments he had put on were old and coarse, and as they were somewhat too large, they not only gave him a slouchy appearance, but made him look at least twenty-five pounds heavier, and considerably shorter of stature. In place of the immaculate white shirt he usually wore was one of flannel, and his tall hat was succeeded by a soft one of felt.

When he had rumpled up his beard, he certainly looked little like himself, but he added to the disguise by browning his skin with some liquid.

The total result satisfied him.

Next he went to a locked drawer and brought out a revolver. He loaded it most carefully with fresh cartridges, and put it in his pocket.

When all was done, he left the room and the house. He had expected some trouble by meeting a servant, but no one, as far as he could see, noticed him at all, and he was soon on the street.

He walked rapidly away, never hesitating as to his course. When, at last, his steps grew somewhat slower, he was in a locality not unfamiliar in the pages of this narrative. It was the same block where Foxy Fred had been held prisoner, the night before, by Eldred and the other "Bearded Brethren."

Otis noted the numbers of the houses, and slowly approached that particular house which the Keener had mentioned to him.

Even the brown coloring on his face did not hide the fact that he was deeply moved; the pallor struggled through the dye. Despite this he was calm, and his nerves of the best. He had desperate work before him, and did not intend to hesitate in it. Before he turned back he intended to have an accounting with his enemies, or leave his lifeless body as a tribute to their own valor.

It was his intention to ring the bell, but the necessity was done away with. Just before he reached the stoop the door unclosed and a man came out.

It was Eldred!

The old foes stood face to face.

The hour was no longer early; the street was one but little traveled. They had the scene to themselves.

Eldred looked but casually at the man-hunter; he failed to recognize him. Whether the former's face was familiar of old to Otis or not, he did not appear at fault.

As the man turned to walk away Otis raised his revolver. He thought he had ample time, and took deliberate aim. He pressed the trigger.

It seemed almost impossible that he should miss at that distance, but at the very moment he fired it could have been seen that Eldred writhed, rather than leaped, to one side. Then, with a long bound, he gained Otis's side. The revolver was raised for another shot, but it was quickly twisted from its owner's grasp. He stood helpless.

Eldred laughed mockingly.

"You don't know the art!" he coolly observed.

Otis stood speechless. He was almost stupefied by the calamity. He was well aware that Eldred was far more than a match for him under equal conditions. The revolver had seemed to even matters up, but it was now on the wrong side.

"So you rebel?" Eldred added. "So you meant to shoot me?"

"I intended to shoot you dead!" Otis plainly, feverishly declared.

"Don't you know that I never sleep? I should be unfit for my work if I were to be taken unaware like that. It is well, Harding Otis, that you proved a recreant. No follower of the Power is fit for his exalted place if he would allow himself to be foiled so easily."

"Exalted! And in a gang of assassins!"

"Man, your words fall on deaf ears. Why should I be angry, why should I heed what a recreant says? The Power ignores you, as the mighty sun in the heavens ignores the wax candle on earth. Mighty is the Power, and strong its arm! I am proud that I serve under its banner. Its will is my law; its commands I do. If I have strength and sagacity to outwit its enemies I am thankful. Man, you have failed, but I shall not!"

Eldred's utterance had grown deep and somber. In its way it was strangely impressive. So was he, with his dark and immobile face. All, combined, made a weird effect which would have led a stranger to shiver.

How must Otis have felt?

Deeply Eldred added:

"When I strike, I kill!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DISGUISED ENEMY.

AT an earlier hour on the same evening Foxy Fred was out on the streets. He returned hurriedly, and entered the presence of Mrs. Stannard.

"Somethin's up!" he announced.

"What?" she asked.

"Perce Berthrong has taken a lesson from you. He is in disguise, an' has got some scheme in view—mebbe he means ter try an' abduct you, but I don't see the need of hevin' a disguise on ter do that."

"Has he learned where we are?"

"Reckon he has," the Keener replied. "You see, when I first went out, a spell ago, I seen a man kind of sizin' this house up. At this stage of affairs it don't do ter let nothin' go fer granted, an' I thought I'd shadder him. I did so. Wal, sir, w'en he'd gone a few blocks he met another man: a slovenly, dirty-lookin' feller; an' they settled down fer a talk. Now,

ef I hadn't had my suspicions aroused I do admit I'd never got on ter it, the disguise was so good, but ef I ain't way off my horizontal, t'other feller was Perce."

"Ah!"

"Put one an' one tergether, an' w'ot do you hev?" inquired Fred.

"I see. One man came here to spy on the house; he met a second man whom you take to be Percy. From this you infer—"

"First, that they know where you be; second, that some p'izon scheme is afoot."

Mrs. Stannard needed no convincing. To add to this evidence was the fact that just such activity was to be expected from Berthrong. He hated her so bitterly that, as she had herself heard him declare, he intended to seek violent revenge. Now, it seemed, he had located her, and intended to hasten matters.

She remained cool in the face of the danger, but did not under-estimate it.

"What do you advise, Fred?" she asked.

"I've been thinkin'. We don't know Perce's plans, so we are in the dark, but this much I do believe in: you'd better face the music than run, fer ter-night. Now, I know of two stout, honest men nigh here. S'pose we smuggle them in at the basement, as a measure of precaution, an' then let things run?"

"A good idea."

None better was thought of, and it was duly carried into effect. Foxy Fred saw the men, and, after their arrival, they were furnished with quarters next to Mrs. Stannard's room. The Keener, too, was to sleep there, and the least disturbance in her room would bring in the three defenders.

She also counted something on the revolver she intended to have within her reach.

These elaborate plans were destined to be upset, however, and they had a surprise when, about nine o'clock, the servant came up with the message:

"A man to see you, ma'am."

"To see me? Who is he?"

"Sure, I don't know, for he said his name was of no account, but I'm after thinking you don't want to see him. He's a very ordinary person in coarse clothes, and they're ragged, too. But the worst is, he's that dirty he would discolor the whole North River."

Mrs. Stannard and Foxy Fred exchanged glances.

"I think I will see this man," returned the former. "You can show him up, Katy."

The servant went out, looking dissatisfied.

"Well?" Mrs. Stannard questioned.

"Perce, sure-pop!" the Keener decided.

"Then we will see what he has to say. It may be dangerous, but we will risk it. Notify our men, and bid them keep near the door, ready for instant service."

"I'll arm myself with a sand-bag, b'jinks!"

This was done, and none too soon. Katy returned, and with her came the visitor. It was Percy Berthrong, but it would have been hard to make the discovery had they not been prepared. His disguise was perfect. He looked like a tramp. He was not ragged enough to be offensive, but he was very much unlike himself in his old, coarse clothes. He looked far shorter and stouter. He had bushy hair and bristling beard, and the question of dirt had not been exaggerated by the servant.

He stood by the door, turning his felt hat in his hands, and pretending to be embarrassed.

"Come in!" directed Mrs. Stannard.

He advanced a few paces.

"You are the man who wanted to see me?"

"Yes, mum," he returned, in a wheezy voice.

"Sit down, then."

He obeyed, and continued to show rare gifts as an actor. He planted himself on the chair as if it were of glass, and liable to break under him. He sat on the extreme edge, and kept himself bolt upright, still turning his hat in his hand.

It was a good imitation of a man of humble life, out of his usual sphere.

Mrs. Stannard's composure was wonderful, and Foxy Fred never had been more at his ease. The former opened conversation.

"Have I ever seen you before?"

"No, mum," he returned, in the same wheezy voice.

"What is your name?"

"John Appleton, mum."

"You have business with me, have you?"

"Yes, mum, I hev. I hev come as a good Samaritan, trustin' I kin be of some use ter you. I am a humble man, mum, an' I wear old clo'se, but my heart is in the right place. I like ter act out the Golden Rule, mum."

"Yes? Well, you can proceed."

Mr. Appleton rolled his eyes around the room. Inquisitive eyes they were, and he noted all things there. Especially did he take heed of Foxy Fred. Something like sullen dissatisfaction seemed to come of the last scrutiny, but he was not turned from his purpose.

"Mum," he proceeded, "you kin see fer yourself that I am a poor man. I don't need ter say that. I ain't poor because I'm lazy, but 'cause I hev played in hard luck. I allays work when I git a chance, an' it is alongside my last job that I hev come to you. I bear a message."

"From whom?"

"Wal, mum, et's like this: I got a job over on Hudson street ter do heavy work fer a gent that I guess ain't no gent. Among my other duties wuz ter carry water up ter the top-floor, where there wa'n't no runnin' water. I had ter leave a pitcherful on a shelf ev'ry mornin', an' orders wuz ter hev it there by five o'clock."

"Wal, mum, I ain't meddlesome, an' I didn't even know who had the room, but this mornin' a voice riz in the room when I put down the water. It wuz a gal's voice, an' it kinder give me a start."

"She axed me ter hold on, an' I held on. Then she interrogated me, wuz I an honest man? I tol' her I wuz, an' then she stated ez how she wuz a prisoner there, an' wanted ter git out. We had a talk, an' when she found I wuz reliable, she says, says she:

"I want you ter go on an arrant."

"All right," says I.

"Et's ter a lady," says she, "an' I want her ter come an' rescue me," says she. "I want her ter come in person, fer she is the best frien' I hev, an' I know she kin advise me."

"I'll do ez you say," says I.

"Go, then," says she, "an' may Providence be with you. Say ter her that it is Clarice Walbridge who wants ter see her!"

CHAPTER XX.

HOW THE CONVICT SUCCEEDED.

THE ragged man ceased, and looked at his companions. He tried to keep the dull expression befitting John Appleton, but his eyes bristled with keen interrogation points. He was eager to learn the result of his attempt.

Mrs. Stannard would have been dull had she not perceived the trap laid for her, but she did not betray any suspicion outwardly, or even glance at Foxy Fred.

"So this Clarice Walbridge is a prisoner?" she returned.

"Yes, mum," Appleton returned.

"Of whom?"

"Wal, the feller who hired me is a one-legged man named Abe Woods. Then there's a woman who is called his sister, Mrs. Shaw."

"Why do they hold the girl prisoner?"

"I don't know, mum."

"How did she know where I was?"

"I don't know, but she bid me ter come here, an' ef you wa'n't here I wuz ter go to another place," and the speaker gave Harding Otis's residence by street and number.

"Am I expected to rescue her by main force?" continued Mrs. Stannard.

"The way she planned it wuz this: You wuz ter take a stout, brave, trusty man, an' him, an' you, an' me wuz ter go along ter the house, an' we was ter go in an' take the poor gal out. See?"

They did see. Nothing could be plainer. The trap was as plain as the bewhiskered head of the trapper, and no more explanation on his part was necessary. Mrs. Stannard answered:

"I am but a casual acquaintance of this Miss Walbridge, and I am not sure I should be doing myself justice to risk anything for her. Why didn't she send for the police, if she is in trouble?"

"She says she has a secret, an' that she would be forever ruined ef the case got inter the courts. Et is a family affair," added Mr. Appleton, warming to his subject, "an' she an' her mother has enemies they hev got ter keep out o' sight of fer a few weeks more. If things is precipitated too soon, she an' her mother will be undone forever. I tell ye, mum, the gal pleaded hard, an' it made my heart ache. I felt fer her, powerful!"

"You look it!"

The comment came dryly from Foxy Fred.

"Eh?" questioned the visitor.

"You look tender-hearted."

"I be."

"How much?"

"Your meanin' ain't clear."

"Neither ain't your face."

"Eh?"

"Et ain't clear o' dirt, I mean. Mister, with so many gallons o' drink rollin' along the North River ev'ry mornin' afore sun-up, you ought ter find a place big enough fer you ter take a bath!"

"Boys should be seen, not heard," declared the visitor, scowling.

"All right; look at me. Et won't cost you a cent, though I dare say you could develop gold-pieces from every pocket of yer wardrobe. Git it in Paris?"

"Git what?"

"Yer raiment. I kinder like it. The goods ain't so smooth an' glossy as some o' the tip-toppers on Murray Hill wear, but it's all there. Fits yer wal, too. Them pants can't never bag at the knee, fer when you move ag'in they would spring out like the sail on a vessel, I reckon. Yer left leg is a bit crooked, ain't it?"

"My legs hev nothin' ter do with you."

"Ef I had 'em I'd use 'em fer the frame ter a lacrosse stick. Put stringin' on them an' they'd be jim-bickies. You never'd make a football player, fer the whole rush-line would go right between yer legs an' never touch the posts."

Foxy Fred spoke with an air of generous candor, but his comments were not relished. The visitor's scowl grew deeper.

"That'll do!" he declared.

"Hope I don't offend, Mr. Applejack."

"My name is Appleton."

"Excuse me, Mr. Applegate."

The man turned to Mrs. Stannard, but his anger was so aroused that his face did not look like that of the kind and Samaritan-like individual he professed to be. He forgot his wheezy utterance, and sharply inquired:

"Are you going, madam?"

"I don't think I will."

"Have you no pity for the young lady?"

"I have abundant pity; but if you are so concerned on that point, why did you not take her out at the time? You were alone with her; you had conversation with her. You are a strong man. If you felt so keenly on the subject, why didn't you take her away at once, instead of coming to me, a woman, to do it?"

The visitor hitched about in his seat, this time in real uneasiness, perhaps.

"There wa'n't no show at that time, fer the captors were all down below, in the way; but the coast will be clear after ten o'clock. I could let her out, then, alone, but she's shy an' timid, an' declares she wants a woman there, an' a friend at that, whom she kin trust."

"Shouldn't wonder ef she's afraid o' you, Mr. Applepie," interpolated Foxy Fred, candidly.

The ragged man would not deign to glance at the speaker.

"Perhaps I can improve on your plan," remarked Mrs. Stannard, evenly, "but tell me your way, in detail."

"Why, you git a stout man, an' him an' you go along with us, an' we jest go ter the house an' take Miss Walbridge away. We do it on the sly, but ready ter fight, if necessary."

"Do you think I would be safe in the house?"

"Oh! we'll take keer o' you, mum!"

"Right, Mr. Applesed!" quoth Fred; "you would!"

"You shall see what I can furnish in the way of a man to keep me company," quietly remarked Mrs. Stannard. "Come in!"

At the order the door opened and the two guards walked in. Mr. Appleton had specified that the man should be a stout one, and he had his fill, now. Two more muscular fellows he rarely had seen; they looked capable of any deed of muscle and daring. More than this, one of them had a revolver, and this weapon he brought to bear upon the visitor at once.

"I guess I'm the huckleberry you want," he remarked, in a matter-of-fact way.

Appleton had started, and he now turned his gaze upon Mrs. Stannard.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

"Simply that I know you, Percy Berthrong!"

She answered swiftly, knowing the time had come for action, but not with her usual coolness. Now she was facing the man who had openly avowed his intention to shoot her, she, knowing his nature as she did, dreaded the next few seconds. Nor had she miscalculated.

The convict saw that his plan had failed, and that he was unmasked. He had one resource left, and he proceeded to use it.

With fiercely flashing eyes he jerked a revolver out from under his ragged coat, and turned it upon his ex-wife.

"Die, traitress!" he cried, madly.

The other men sprung forward to check the shot. They were too late. Ever quick with a revolver the visitor pulled the trigger. The weapon was discharged.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN THE NICK OF TIME.

HARDING OTIS folded his arms and met Eldred's gaze without perceptible emotion.

"I am at your mercy," he admitted. "Kill me, if you wish."

"Your time has not quite come," Eldred replied, like a machine.

"I know of no rule of the Power which requires its followers to torture as well as kill. You say you have certain orders. Why not carry them out at once? I have given up hope. I came here, to-night, resolved that if I must die I would not be the only victim. I did not think to save myself, but pride would not let me fall like a craven. I say plainly that, if my will had availed anything, you and your associates would have fared hard. Luck was against me; I failed. Do your own work, now."

"No," Eldred answered, unmoved. "You are warned, but the hour of your death is not yet set. I await due orders, and will do nothing until such orders come. Go, now; I have no more to say to you!"

Otis hesitated. His enemy was larger than he, and had the advantage of the revolver. Despite this he was tempted to make a fresh attack, and only the probability that it would end in mortification, rather than tragedy, deterred him.

Eldred was like a rock.

Convinced, at last, of the folly of further effort, the rich man turned slowly away. Without another word to his enemy, without a backward look, he walked down the street. No fear of thus exposing himself to attack in the rear troubled him, and his movements were deliberate.

As he turned the corner of the block he took one glance. Eldred still stood as he had left him.

"Insatiate monster!" he murmured; "why don't you do your work and return whence you came?"

Step by step he retraced his way until again before the door of his own home. He entered. Chance again favored him, and he reached his own room without being seen by any member of the household. Once there he removed his disguise and replaced everything as before. Then he produced another revolver, loaded it, laid it on the table and sat down to smoke.

"Events must take their course," he remarked, quietly. "I only hope I may be able to sell my life dearly!"

Percy Berthrong had fully intended to take his ex-wife's life, and the other men had been too much dazed to interfere in time, but one member of the party was thoroughly alert.

That one had looked for something of the kind. When the revolver was raised the Keener leaped forward agilely. Just as Percy pressed the trigger the former struck with the sand-bag, and the bullet plowed a hole in the ceiling. Plaster fell freely, but no further damage was done.

Foxy Fred had saved his detective comrade's life by his timely blow, and in another moment the two men had disarmed the ex-sport, and raised him to his feet.

"Wal, you're a jim-bickey, ain't you?" exclaimed Foxy Fred, derisively.

Berthrong had nothing to say.

"Ef you give the word," put in one of the defenders, "we'll throw the feller down the stairs an' break his neck. He deserves it!"

"Et might break the stairs, too," returned the Keener, nonchalantly.

Mrs. Stannard looked only at the foiled assassin. He was glaring fiercely at her, but was wholly helpless in the hands of his captors. He had played his cards and failed; he could do no more, but his hatred was as bitter as ever.

"Percy Berthrong," she spoke, presently, "you have been saved from being a murderer."

"May destruction overtake those who prevented it!" he retorted.

"Knowing you as I do, I am not surprised at your sentiments. Yet, despite all I have suffered at your hands, I should be glad to find you in a different frame of mind. My death would do you no good, much as you desire it, for your purpose is known to so many that arrest would follow fast upon your crime, wherever it might be committed, and you know what would follow arrest. Think of this, and do not pursue your desperate purpose further."

He sneered scornfully.

"You need not preach to me, for it will avail nothing. My purpose is fixed, and only my own death can change it. You are doomed, woman. Further than this I have nothing to say. Do with me as you will!"

He closed his lips, and was resolute in the purpose to say no more.

The Keener and Mrs. Stannard conferred. The former was in favor of handing the prisoner over to the police at once, but it had become a passion with her to rescue Clarice Walbridge. Believing this could be better done with the ex-transport at liberty, she insisted that he should be set free. Of course, her wishes prevailed.

Berthrong was led down-stairs and out of the front door; and there the dissatisfaction of one of the men that such clemency was shown him found vent in a sturdy kick which almost raised Perce into the air. Painful it must have been both to his person and his pride, but, beyond one glance at the kicker, he made no demonstration. He walked down the block and was soon out of sight.

"That goes a man that'll make trouble!" darkly prophesied he who had done the kicking.

Foxy Fred returned to Mrs. Stannard.

"We must leave here, at once," she announced.

And that night they slept under another roof. The next morning, when Fred went to his detective comrade, he was surprised and not a little disturbed to see her in the disguise of Juan Costa.

"Hullo! wot's this?" he demanded.

"I am going to rejoin the gang," she calmly replied.

"Singin' 'skeeters! I wouldn't do it!" he declared.

"I cannot, will not rest until Clarice Walbridge is found. Remember that she is suffering for me; that they took her by mistake when trying to abduct me. My duty is plain."

"Dunno whether it is or not," Fred contended.

"This last scrap will only put Perce on the alert, an' he may see, this time, that Juan Costa ain't so much a stranger as he looks. S'pose you got gobbled, too; I'd hev a regular old high-jinks of a time tryin' ter rescue both you an' Clarice, wouldn't I?"

It was a strong argument, but Mrs. Stannard was not to be turned from her purpose. After breakfast she took her tall hat and fancy cane, and walked over to the crooks' resort.

She found Berthrong and Berlong both in, and was cordially greeted. The only sign Perce gave of his adventure was a slight limp which indicated that the kicker had worn a boot too heavy to be pleasant under such circumstances.

Conversation became general, but most of the visible high spirits were on the visitor's side.

"I'm getting on finely," he observed, airily. "All I need now is money and a wife. You have promised to put me in the way of filling my pockets; now, what can you do as to a wife?"

The question was so put that Perce looked doubtful.

"Are you in earnest?" he asked.

"Yes, fully."

"Then, by Jove! you shall have the wife!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE EVENTFUL NIGHT.

THE ex-transport spoke with the air of one who has an inspiration, and he added:

"We have just what you want. It's your duty to marry, too—"

"I remember your good opinion of wives," put in Costa, dryly.

"That don't count; one case ought not to prejudice the whole. You are a Cuban, and I'll say that American girls beat the world, while as to New York girls, they are simply the cream of America. Yes, Mr. Costa; I know a girl who would make you an admirable wife."

"Young?"

"Yes."

"Charming?"

"Yes."

"Deuced good news!"

Senor Costa seemed to be very much interested in the subject, and Berthrong went on to eulogize the lady and her beauty. He drew a very vivid picture, and Juan let him go ahead, though impatient to arrive at more important features of the case. When given a chance he very naturally inquired:

"Where does this divine creature live?"

"Right here in New York."

"Ay, but where?"

"Fact is, we have her under a trifle of restraint now, but the matter is not serious. Our men abducted her by mistake. They supposed they had an entirely different person until she was got to The Nest, as we call her present residence. Well, there she was, by Jove! the wrong woman; but we couldn't send her back. She knew our secrets too well. We have, however, used her with the utmost respect, and if she could be

prevailed upon to get interested in one of our friends, of course we could set her free without any danger to ourselves."

"Perhaps she would not take to a Cuban."

"You are only different from our people in that you are a bit dark, and more vivacious. Certainly, she could not find fault with you."

"I'd like to see her."

"You shall. This girl is a white elephant on our hands, so to speak, and your proposition makes the way clear. You shall pose as her rescuer; a genuine knight errant, and all that sort of thing. I have been considering the advisability of taking her to a place we have on Staten Island. We will do that this very night, and then we'll arrange a plan to bring you in as a hero. There must be no positive, immediate rescue, for she must get infatuated with you before she's liberated. All this can be arranged."

"By Jove! I like this plan!" declared Juan.

"It is clever," Perce admitted. "Now, let it be like this: This evening you take the boat at the Battery, and meet Berlong in the ferry-house at St. George, which is on Staten Island. He will conduct you to the proper place. Let your meeting be at nine o'clock. About eleven I and some of my men will take the girl from where she now is, and convey her to the same place in a sail-boat."

"Capital!" Juan agreed.

"Enough said! Berlong and I must now go out, but we'll not be gone over two hours. Do you remain here, and when we return we would like to have you spend the day with us."

"I will, or until the middle of the afternoon."

"Good! Well, we're off, now."

Perce and Berlong went out. The first thing the honest Cuban then did was to sit down at the desk and write. His pen flew rapidly for several minutes. When he was done he inclosed his work in an envelope and went out and mailed it.

"Fred will soon get it!" he murmured, as he returned to the house.

And the Keener did get it in due time. He found a full account of Berthrong's plot, and a counter-plot to beat him.

"They must never get Clarice to Staten Island," the Cuban had written. "You must see Detective Warden and form a plan to rescue her, right in New York. To do this you must know whence they start, and this I will learn during the day. Then you can intercept them right at the starting-point. As for me, of course I shall not go to Staten Island. I shall leave them by three, or four, o'clock. Will then see you, or send you word as to the point whence they start out."

Foxy Fred read this with much satisfaction.

"Singin' 'skeeters! I do b'lieve we've got 'em!" exclaimed the Keener. "Certain we hev ef things don't go all ter smash—but it would be jest like Perce ter work in some dodge that will knock us out. I'll call on Jethro Warden, right away."

The night which followed was dark and foggy. At a certain time two persons left the new refuge. Mrs. Stannard had passed the day successfully with her enemies, and had finally rejoined Fred and told them definitely where Clarice then was, unless Berthrong had lied; but the ex-wife did not think it prudent to take part in the adventure.

She remained at home, and Warden and Fred started out alone. Adding two men on the way who had been previously engaged, they went near the house where Clarice was said to be.

"This will be a great triumph," remarked Warden exultantly.

"Huge!" the Keener agreed.

"Yonder is the house. I wish we could look in. Who comes here so fast?"

A man was striding toward them, passing the house.

"Looks like a parson out fer an airin'. Hello! Singin' 'skeeters!"

"What now?"

"Say, I b'lieve he's a gent I call the Man in Black. He is, sure-pop! Say, he's a great an' vexatious myst'ry; he is. I'll stop him. Hullo! neighbor, where so fast an' fleetin'?"

The Man in Black came to a halt.

"What! are you here?"

"We ain't nowhere else."

The man of mystery ran his gaze over the crowd; then again addressed Fred, and his words were hurried:

"Why are you here? speak quickly! But let me break the ice. Is it to rescue a girl from yonder house?"

Warden made haste to prevent a direct answer, but Foxy Fred was ahead of him.

"That's just why we're here, mister."

"Then you're too late!"

"Too late?"

"She was taken out but a few minutes ago, and has been conveyed by carriage toward the North River. I was on my way for help to rescue her, but—"

He hesitated and looked at the party as if he thought the desired aid was at hand. The Keener thought so, too.

"Fall in with us!" he directed. "Quick, fellers; we may be able ter drop on 'em yit, ef they start from the pier they said they would. It ain't far. Ef they took a carriage et wuz a waste of money, unless their scheme was ter drive about town a bit, an' deceive their prisoner as ter how far they go. I've heer'd o' sech things. Hustle, fellers!"

Long before this speech was finished the energetic Keener had his force in rapid motion, and they made good time to the pier. On their arrival there was no sign of unusual action.

Too early, or too late?

That was the all-important question, and Foxy Fred agreed to "scout" and see if any boat lay there.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE STREET.

THE Keener showed his usual skill, and moved down on the pier without making himself at all conspicuous. He soon decided that if the boat was still there, no guard was set, and he proceeded to get a view of the water.

"A boat, by jiminy!" he muttered. "Yes? an' there's two men in it. They are layin' there as quiet as you please. It's dollars ter doughnuts they're waitin' fer somebody, an' who should it be, unless Perce an' his heelsers?"

The scout returned to Warden and the other men, and made his report.

"There is yet hope," remarked the Man in Black.

"May I ask," inquired Warden, "what your interest in the case is?"

"All honest men should be interested."

"It is sometimes doubtful to know who the honest men are," retorted Warden, dryly.

Foxy Fred touched the Man in Black's sleeve, and asked in a low voice:

"Did you know Eldred an' his crew afore they came ter New York?"

"Never!"

"But you have some grudge against 'em?"

"None whatever."

"Then why are you against them?"

"Those who are not against them are for them."

With this enigmatical reply, the man of mystery turned aside, and Fred had to let the matter rest. He was, however, more than ever puzzled. Who and what the Man in Black was, he could not tell.

The sound of a carriage was heard, and the rescue-party concealed themselves. They were none too soon. The vehicle rolled down a side street and approached the pier. It halted, and a man who had been sitting on the box with the driver leaped down.

"Perce Berthrong!" the Keener whispered.

The ex-transport crossed the pier with rapid steps, going to a point above the men in the boat. He could be heard in conversation with them for a few moments, after which he retraced his steps.

He opened the carriage door, and two other men appeared. Then, last of all, came a woman.

No one there knew Clarice Walbridge by sight, but they did not doubt that they were then looking at her. She was not bound in any way, and no rudeness was offered her, but she evidently was ill at ease. Berthrong spoke with her and pointed to the pier, but it was clear that the dark area filled her with fresh forebodings.

The ex-transport took her by the arm, but she shrunk back.

"I don't want to go!" she was heard to say.

Foxy Fred and his companions remained passive. They were almost in the track of the abductors, but to uncover themselves too early might be to defeat the purposes of justice. At this time, like Berthrong and his men, they were so intent upon looking at her that they failed to see anything else.

More might have been seen.

From the side street dark forms moved forward like phantoms in black, and with but little more noise. They closed upon the crooks unseen; then, at a low word of command, sprang upon them with a fierceness which reminded the observers of the attack of panthers. Heavy blows were dealt, and the woman was torn away from her former companions.

"What's that?" Warden cried. "Who are they?"

The Keener grasped the arm of the Man in Black.

"Say, it's Eldred an' his men. She'll be worse off with them. To the rescue!"

The command came none too soon. The Bearded Brethren were in retreat, and going with the soft-footed celerity peculiar to them. Fred and his companions had started to their feet; they now hastened to save the fate-buffed girl.

But at that juncture the retreat of the Brethren were blocked by men who wore the blue coats of New York policemen.

"Hal my men are at hand!" cried the Man in Black.

If the Brethren had seemed like tigers before they were more like them, now. The dignity of the law did not appall them; finding new foes at hand, they assailed the police with fury which drove the latter back. The feeble gaslight showed the glitter of knives, and the Brethren's mode of attack was clear.

The blue-coats would have been carved to pieces had they not known how to deal with such desperate fellows. Night-sticks had been the weapons at first, but they could not afford to throw their own lives away. Revolvers began to crack, but even this did not check the maddened assailants until the last one lay prostrate.

The woman, frightened beyond power of reason by these occurrences, had started to flee. A light-footed pursuer was on her track, and soon ran her down. It was Foxy Fred, and he caught and held her.

"Singin' 'skeeters!" he exclaimed; "you needn't be scared. I'll take care o' you."

"Mercy, mercy!" she gasped.

"Brace up!" he requested. "Don't you see the perleece are here? They'll look out fer you. The danger is all over— Hal! they're at it, again! Jiminy crickets! it's my fellers and Percy Berthrong, now!"

There was a fight on the pier, and it was not hard to understand it. Zealous Warden had tried to make sure of the crooks, and the result was another fight.

The Man in Black came to the Keener's side. "You're ahead of me," he observed, "and I judge you will get the reward."

"What reward?"

"For finding Clarice Walbridge."

"Do you want it?"

"I can do without it. But see!—the fighting is over. The crooks are beaten on the pier, and Eldred's men are dead, or as good as that, in the street. Let us go to them. Stay! I will call a patrolman to care for this girl, who has had trouble enough."

He whistled, and, as soon as he had gained the attention of the blue-coats, one of them came quickly at the bidding. He was told to care for the girl, and then Fred and the Man in Black went to the nearest group.

"What is the result?" the latter asked.

"We had to do it, sir," was the deferential reply. "They fought like fiends, and would have done fatal work with their knives, had we not taken the only alternative."

"I saw all, and you need not fear. Are they dead?"

"All dead, sir, I think."

"The three 'Bearded Brethren' lay prostrate on the ground, and there was no sign of life, but as the Man in Black bent over them and began an examination, one of the trio opened his eyes and his lips.

"Let me alone!" he ordered, curtly.

"You are more exclusive than when you tried to cut these officers to pieces," the Man in Black remarked, sarcastically.

"I have my death-wound, and you cannot add to it. Let me alone or touch me; I care not, I despise you and yours. My curse rest upon you! Police hirelings are never men. I despise you!"

"Stoutly said, but your opinions weigh but little. Sergeant Green, take charge of all, the dead and the living."

"Yes, Mr. Inspector."

Foxy Fred had been gaining ideas as he saw how deferentially the blue-coats addressed the Man in Black, and the last words gave him more light.

"Singin' 'skeeters! be you a police inspector?" he cried, in wonder.

"I am," the Man in Black replied, briefly.

He was looking toward the pier, where he seemed to find something of interest, and he now walked rapidly in that direction. Foxy Fred followed him. Warden and his assistants had several prisoners, one of whom was Con, but

the Keener looked in vain for the most familiar face.

"Where's Percy Berthrong?" he asked.

"Dead!" returned Warden, briefly.

"Eh? That so? Then where's his body?"

"In the dock. He fought like a tiger, but one of us got in a blow with a club, and it knocked him off the pier. It is probable that the blow, alone, would have been fatal, but he was doubly doomed. Certainly, the blow must have stunned him, and if he touched water alive, he is drowned by this time."

"Fitting end for a man like him," commented the inspector.

Finding no more of active work to do, the victors gathered up the relics of the fight. The living law-breakers were soon under lock and key. Of these Eldred was by far the most interesting, but nothing could be got from him further. He was almost as silent as a statue, and as defiant with his life ebbing away as in his days of power.

The inspector went to the quarters of the Bearded Brethren. He found but little there, and nothing of interest except a letter which had that evening arrived by mail. He tore it open, read it, meditated, and then carried it to Eldred. The latter also read it, and though the contents did not make his somber expression change, he remarked:

"I have sold my life in vain!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHAT IT ALL MEANT.

THE following morning the inspector and Fred called upon Harding Otis. They were occupied with him for some time, and then a messenger was sent to Mrs. Otis, to say that a gentleman wished to see her.

When she saw that her husband was present her eyes began to glitter, but the inspector took charge of affairs with an air which, somehow, quelled her rebellious pride, and made her listen against her will.

"Madame," he explained, "I am a detective who was employed some days ago to work upon a certain case. Your husband engaged me, and I took up the work only as a personal favor to him. I have operated in disguise."

Foxy Fred smiled. The inspector, as he stood there in his true form, was very unlike the lank and ministerial-looking "Man in Black." He would never have been recognized.

"It is essential to my story," the speaker added, "that your husband should tell a tale of the past."

Otis took up the subject somewhat nervously. "Mrs. Otis," he began, "I have not told all the truth to you, of late. Before I ever saw you I had married, but my wife was dead. I swear that this is true. Hear my story:

"When twenty years old I went to California, and there met and married Gladys Marchmont. She was a noble girl, but almost a child. Her only relative known to me was her mother. From the first I saw that the latter was peculiar. As time wore on I found she was more than that. She kept strange company, and I found out that she was not innocent of connection with the lawless work of a lawless neighborhood.

"I could devote an hour to describing how facts gradually dawned upon me, but, instead, will be brief. There was a strange, fanatical society there, composed of men and women. It was very old. Once, perhaps, it had been ruled by some high motive, but in that generation it had relapsed into a society of robbers and cut-throats, and no more.

"When I had been there not quite two years my wife's mother betrayed the band, frustrating one of their choicest plans, and, helping herself to all of their money she could get, fled.

"Now, the penalty of this treachery was death not only to her, but to all her descendants. Knowing this, my wife and I took our infant daughter and made a desperate attempt to get beyond the reach of the band. They did not overtake us, but, on the way, my wife fell ill of a fever and died.

"I was left with my infant. I came North. Fear of the band haunted me. I was not sure I was in any danger, but by their infamous laws my babe was doomed. For her sake I determined to separate her from myself forever, and I gave her in charge of a friend of mine in Ohio, to rear.

"She grew to womanhood as Clarice Walbridge.

"Of late I have thought much about her, and, having never heard from the band, I determined to satisfy my parental feelings and have

her by me. This I could do without her being the wiser, as she had never heard of, or seen, me since she was old enough to remember.

"With the aid of my friends I managed to get her here as governess.

"I could not have brought her at a worse time. The band had just located me, and, in some way, they learned who she was. They planned to seize and slay her, but Percy Berthrong was ahead of them. He sent men to seize Mrs. Stannard, but they made a mistake and took Clarice, instead.

"Mrs. Otis, you know the truth, now. I had been married before I met you, but my wife was dead."

He ceased to speak, and the inspector added:

"Of the three men sent here to do this desperate work two are dead and the other, Eldred, is dying. He has just received orders from the band which removes the doom. It has been learned that Mr. Otis's first wife, Gladys Marchmont, was not the child of the woman who claimed her, and who betrayed the band. Hence, no vendetta exists against Gladys's child. Clarice is safe from further trouble.

"I have seen the orders of the band to Eldred. The papers bid him let Otis and Clarice alone, and return to his fellows. It came a little too late for the good of Eldred and his fellows, but if the band now has any grudge, it must be against the police of New York. I think we can bear it."

The ex-Man in Black arose, and Foxy Fred followed his example. They knew they could do no better than to leave husband and wife alone, to make their peace. Outside the door the inspector remarked:

"We part here, but I shall be pleased to see you at any time."

"I'll call," the Keener agreed; "but say, it seems funny ter think of you as a detective!"

"Otis dared not betray his interest in the case. He pretended to be indifferent, but, really, came to me almost at once, and insisted that I take the case. Then I became the Man in Black. Good-day!"

"So-long, my friend. Now, I'll go ter my detective comrade, Juan Costa Stannard!"

The following day a city daily had this news-item:

"The body washed ashore, near St. George, Staten Island, yesterday, has been identified as that of Percy Berthrong, an escaped convict. In a fight with the police, the previous night, he was knocked off from a pier of the North River by a heavy blow. The condition of the body shows that he was dead before touching the water, so the blow was the cause. It is said that his real name was Berlong, and that he was a brother of the Berlong now under arrest. A desperate man, few will mourn his death."

Eldred died. With him went the last sign of the band in New York, for the leaders evidently did not see fit to wage war on the police force of the metropolis.

The law did not deal lightly with the city crooks who had made life so unpleasant for the Keener and his friends, and Sing Sing received a due addition to its force in striped uniforms.

Harding Otis made peace with his wife, and Clarice again became a member of the household, but not as an employee. The truth was told her, and she was openly acknowledged as Otis's daughter. Her step-mother proved unexpectedly gracious, and the girl found deserved happiness.

Otis well rewarded all who had served him.

He who may be known here only as "The Inspector" and Detective Warden continued their work in the old field, with new cases.

Foxy Fred and Mrs. Stannard were again able to move about the streets without expecting attack every moment.

"Guess we had better lay back fer a few weeks an' hev a rest on Otis's money," the Keener observed. "Or do you want ter go an' hunt Eldred's chums. Ef so, say the word."

It was only a joke, and Mrs. Stannard shook her head.

"All I ask is a peaceful life here in New York."

"Jes' so! That's w'ot suits me best, but when p'izon skunks git ugly, an' we buckle on our armor as detective-comrades, we jest make the crooks o' New York shake in their socks; we do, you bet!"

THE END.

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